

# Eros Turannos

## Emerald-Leaves

Star Wars - All Media Types

Complete



**Eros Turannos**

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## Copyright Information

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## Summary

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### Description:

Love the Tyrant. Oderint dum metuant— Let them hate as long as they fear. AU set in time around the Clone Wars. Vader/Amidala. Mature content.

### Notes:

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For [Emerald-Leaves](#).

This work was not created by me but by Emerald-Leaves on fanfiction.net. Their original work was deleted on that site with no word from the creator. I only found this out recently when I wanted to read this story again and found out it was gone. I've just found it so only posted this up because I want to be able to go back to this and re-read it anytime I want and for those of us who love this story too. Again do not give me credit for this work.

Work was published 8/22/2013

(See the end of the work for [more notes](#).)

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## 1. Arrangements

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Kriff.

Padmé Amidala was not normally one to curse, but this certainly was an acceptable opportunity. She was tired, scared, and completely out of options. They'd caught them. There was no way out. She had put all her chips out on the table and had lost the hand. The Empire had called her bluffs and was coming to collect, only she had nothing to give except that which was dearest to her.

Immediately she scrambled to her feet and went through her room to her personal pad. She began deleting every incriminating piece of information she had, even as troopers were coming ever closer to the apartment complex. Everything, every file, every letter, every everything had to be destroyed. With that in mind, after deleting what needed to be gone, she smashed the pad and stomped on the pieces before sweeping up the remains and shoving them in a box under her bed that housed other broken pieces of equipment she hadn't taken out to recycling yet.

As she straightened herself up and her apartment as best as she could, Padmé's mind buzzed with possibilities as to what she could say. Of course she was a high ranking member of society, she could deflect a lot of what was happening... at least for a short time. But the Empire thus far was not exactly known for being reasonable. If there was even a hint of treason, a being was sentenced and silenced so fast there was no time for appeals, no time for any sort of help or intervention. There was, more often than not, not even a trial. Once within the grasp of the Empire all anyone could be was kriffed.

Hearing the Storm Troopers just outside, Padmé sat down on her couch and picked up a pad that she'd brought home with work on it. She turned her head towards the door, schooling her expression to be one of shock for when the troopers kicked down her door. They would be filming her reaction, of course, and anything that she did or didn't do would be used against her in court... Not that the court system was fair if they bothered with it at all. It was just for show. Like the senate.

When the troopers finally did burst through her doors, Padmé's expression was one of perfect shock as she stood up from her seat. "What is this?" she demanded after the appropriate amount of time. "What are you doing here?"

Troopers began flooding into the apartment, blasters raised as they scouted out the apartment, looking for anyone else that might be hidden inside. Luckily there was no one here today. "We have a warrant for your arrest, Senator," the Commander said bluntly, already getting binders out to cuff her.

"Arrest?!" Padmé exclaimed with the right amount of shocked indignation. "On what grounds?"

"Treason," the Commander replied simply. "Now please turn around."

“But I haven’t done anything!” She had to put up a bit of a fight. It would be unrealistic if she simply gave into demands.

“Please turn around,” the Commander said again, this time a little less patiently. “You’re to be questioned.”

“For what?” Padmé snapped, narrowing her eyes. “I haven’t done anything. What sort of treasonous acts have I supposable committed?”

“I don’t have clearance to give you that information,” the Commander snapped.

“All’s clear, Commander,” a trooper called out from her bedroom.

“Come with me, Senator. If you continue to resist, I will stun you.”

Padmé weighed her options. She knew she was going to end up in a cell no matter what, but what looked less suspicious? Fighting as was her instinct when she was caught by surprise — and she had to make them all believe she was caught by surprise— or to give in to the request? She thought about all of the people she’d be letting down if she chose unwisely.

“Fine,” she spat, turning around and putting her hands behind her back. “But this is ridiculous! When I make contact with my—”

“Commander,” another trooper cut off her rant. “We found a box of destroyed equipment.”

“What sort of equipment?” the Commander asked, as he cuffed Padmé.

“A broken pad, some old holocoms, and some broken pieces from a droid.”

“That’s my scrap box,” Padmé rolled her eyes, scowling at the emotionless white helmets. “Is not taking out my recycling somehow treasonous now, too?”

The troopers didn’t reply as they took her away, bring the box and several others with old reports and whatnot with them. Padmé was a little worried, but she’d done everything to erase any evidence and connection she had with the Rebel Alliance, and it would take a genius with too much time on their hands over the course of a year or more to retrieve any information from her pad. The Empire would lose interest and patience. And besides, everyone had a scrap box of old technology. Nothing looked suspicious, especially since she’d kept other boxes of things under her bed, too. She knew they’d look there, and they knew she knew they’d look there. She had made herself look as less suspicious as possible without that looking suspicious. If they wanted to actually arrest her for a reason, they would have a hard time doing so, and they would have to have a good reason. The galaxy was on the side of Senator Amidala, Champion of the People and former Queen of Naboo. The new Empire couldn’t afford anymore slipups, especial if someone as beloved as Padmé was in the middle.

The ride to the interrogation center was long and silent. Padmé had to work to stay angry and not let any of her nervousness show. She struggled a bit, as was to be expected, and she even snarled at the troopers that rode in the back with her a couple times. Not that they responded, but it did make her feel a little better.

When it came time for the interrogation, Padmé snapped and yelled at the troopers some more, demanding to see her lawyer. Technically she had diplomatic immunity, or she had before the Empire’s creation, but even as she reminded the interrogators of that fact, she knew that diplomatic immunity probably didn’t exist anymore. At least not for her. But thankfully

after about an hour or so of questioning, they must have gotten bored and/or too frustrated with her, because she was taken to a holding cell. Once alone, after yelling at the guards some more, Padmé slumped down on the bunk with a sigh.

What a day.

Now that she was alone, she had time to think. She knew that there were cams watching her closely, but she just showed her true exhaustion over the situation. She had nothing to hide... as far as they knew. She laid back and stared up at the ceiling wondering what would become of her, of what would become of the rebels. All the message she'd received earlier had said was: They know. They're after you.

What did that mean, though? How much did they know? They obviously didn't know much if they had taken the time to question her and not just simply put her on the short list for execution. With what the Empire had found out, it was obvious that they still didn't know enough and they had to keep her around for a little while.

Would they torture her? She hadn't thought of that earlier, but the possibility of it frightened her. But of course she couldn't let on, or she had to try not to. Despite how much the Emperor hated it, Padmé was still a very important figure in the galaxy. Despite the people being stupid enough to elect an emperor and support the overthrow of democracy, they still very much adored Padmé. She was essentially the sweetheart of the galaxy, the Champion of Good, and she had a tremendous weight behind her when it came to politics. The Emperor couldn't just sweep her under the rug as he had with so many others.

But what would he do with her? The Rebel Alliance had a pretty bad reputation with most people at the moment. Somehow Palpatine had been able to manipulate events so that the Empire had looked like the ultimate good in a crumbling, chaotic society. The people believed that he had saved them all from a virtual galaxy-wide apocalypse, for Force sake! So even though there were those few, like Padmé, who knew the truth of how evil and corrupt the Empire was and joined the Rebel Alliance, the vast majority of the galaxy backed the Emperor, as scary as that was. If Palpatine accused her of being a part of the rebels, even with her popularity and the sure outcry that would come from such a thing, Padmé feared that in the end, the people would turn against her. The real question now was, how long would that take?

An hour or so passed with Padmé trying to think of every scenario that could occur when the troopers came back. They opened her cell and gestured for her to get up and follow. They weren't talking. That wasn't a good sign. Even though she tried to fight it, a thrill of fear shot through Padmé. Had they convicted her already? Had they found out? Had she not destroyed all the information about the Alliance well enough, and they found it? Did Palpatine simply not care and was going to get rid of her? The possibilities for the troopers' sudden change in attitude were numerous and could be as simple as them just not wanting to speak. It was quite possible that her imagination was getting the better of her, and so Padmé forced herself to remain calm as she got up and walked past the troopers, allowing them to take her to wherever it was she was supposed to go.

As it turned out, she was escorted to the Throne Room of the recently built palace. Padmé had not realized that the detention cells were so near or connected to the palace before, but she knew she shouldn't be all that surprised. Palpatine was a sick bastard, he probably went to

torture prisoners for fun when he had some down time for laughs. He was a Sith Lord, after all. But Padmé still had trouble grasping that idea. She'd known him for years as just a friendly politician from Naboo, and sadly enough, a mentor of sorts in politics. Never had she imagined the kind old gentlemen to be a Sith! Not like his apprentice...

"Ah, Senator Amidala," the Emperor's voice floated towards her across the large expanse once the majestic five meter mahogany doors were opened. "It is so good to see you, my dear."

Padmé scowled. "EmperorPalpatine," she spat as she and the troopers continued to walk forward before stopping before the throne. "What is the meaning of this?"

The old man grinned in sick delight, bearing his yellow teeth. It was disgusting. "Oh, you do not know?" he mocked, his voice sympathetic, but Padmé could hear the sneer underneath. "I received troubling news about the Rebel Alliance this morning."

Padmé continued to scowl, not giving any sign of guilt or understanding. "The Reb—? What does that have to do with me?" she asked incredulously. The Emperor wasn't the only actor.

The smile slipped from the Sith's face as his sharp golden eyes narrowed into slits. All humor seemed to have fled him. "You know perfectly well what this has to do with you."

A chill wanted to run down the senator's spine, but she refused to let it. Perhaps it wasn't so hard to imagine her former mentor as a Sith after all. "I don't know what you're talking about," she snapped, working to keep her breathing steady.

The Emperor sat back in his chair, staring at her intently for several long minutes, even as Padmé tried her best to continue glaring at the old man. It was much harder than she thought it would be, and a few times she had to dart her eyes away before continuing her glaring. His eyes were just so intense. They burned. But she couldn't give up. She couldn't let herself crumble and be pushed around. If she was going to go down and die, she would not show weakness, would keep her head held high... or at least, she hoped she could.

After another moment, the Emperor leaned forward, twitching his hand ever so slightly. It was some sort of signal, but Padmé didn't know what for. She supposed it was the signal of her doom, but she remained staring at the Emperor.

"Senator," Palpatine began, a cool, easy smirk finding its way onto his lips. That wasn't a good sign. "I do not think that you have been introduced to my apprentice?"

Brown eyes widened in realization and fear. Without meaning to, Padmé flinched, cursing herself as she did so. Being face to face with the Emperor was one thing, she'd done it so many times before and could recall him as a different man, one less intimidating than he was now. But the Emperor's heir? That was something completely different.

The nasty smirk grew into a vicious smile as the Emperor leaned back casually, as though making himself more at ease. "You haven't, have you?" he mused cruelly. 'I think it's high time you become acquainted with him. Lord Vader!' he called. "You may come forth."

Padmé watched in horror as a figure melted out of the shadows, the looming form of Darth Vader. The sudden sound of his respirator hissing filled the room, and the senator found

herself shuddering before she could have stopped it. Who wouldn't cringe at the sight of the Emperor's Right Hand? Who in their right mind would not be scared of Darth Vader?

Not much was known about the Emperor's Shadow, but everyone knew that the Sith was dangerous. Extremely so. Some said more so than the Emperor. Who and what Vader was remained a mystery to the galaxy. No one knew why the creature beneath the black armor wore the suit, why he needed a respirator, and no one probably ever would. There was no home planet for this Sith, no life before the Empire that could be traced. It was as though Vader suddenly just appeared, born a fully grown terror alongside the Empire. The moment the Empire was created, so Vader too had crawled up from the depths of the underworld. Some said he was spawned out of hell by Palpatine to be his warrior, others said that he was simply an extension of the Emperor himself, separated by sorcery to serve. But what was known for a fact was that Darth Vader would now and always remain an enigma.

This enigma, however, was known for his ruthlessness, his cunning, and his brutality. There were very few people that lived once Vader was sent to enact Imperial 'justice,' and those that did were only yet alive because Vader willed it. There was no reasoning with the Sith and begging was utterly useless. Some said it strengthened him. Once Lord Vader had it in his mind to kill you, you were dead. Vader cast a Shadow of Death upon the Empire in the name of 'order.' He was the poster child for the Empire, the looming threat and reminder to everyone who had thoughts of disobeying or causing trouble. Everyone knew and feared the Sith in black, and for good reason.

But what was he doing here now? Vader was a highly skilled and fierce warrior, surely the Emperor would not waste his apprentice on a mere execution of a lowly senator? Of perhaps Vader would be the one to torture her? Padmé had heard rumors of the Sith's... efficient methods of gaining information. If stories were to be believed—and everyone was nearly one hundred percent certain that these stories could not be made up—the interrogation of enemies by field commanders of the 501st was like an interview for the holovid compared to what Vader did to you. One story said that Vader once disemboweled a man while he'd still been alive and forced him to eat his own entrails. Another said that he began dismembering a woman's child in front of her and had troopers hold the poor woman down so she could not look away.

If there was a reason for Senator Amidala to pale and feel ill, being introduced to Lord Vader was a valid reason. No one could blame her for her fear, and yet she despised herself because of it. She could have handled the Emperor killing her, could have gone out with a smile had it been Storm Troopers. But not Darth Vader. He was like a creature out of her nightmares. Her own personal demon.

As she pondered all of the horrible scenarios that could befall her soon at the hands of the evil creature, the Sith walked right past the senator and the troopers holding her to kneel down before the Emperor, his head low. "What is thy bidding, my master?" his booming baritone filled the throne room impressively.

The Emperor smiled wider, and Padmé knew he was drinking in her fear. "Rise, my old friend. Rise! I've brought you here to introduce you to Senator Amidala."

As Vader stood, Padmé, coming out of her astonishment, suddenly realized just how big the creature actually was. He was massive! He stood at two meters tall or so, and his

shoulders were impressively broad, even without the armor. As he towered over her— and everyone else for that matter— Padmé understood why so many stories and legends had so quickly surrounded the Heir to the Empire. Vader was like some sort of nightmare from the ancient times come to life with his impressive bulk and terrifying presence without adding in his strange Force powers. As he looked down at her, the senator wondered briefly if she might throw up.

“Senator Amidala,” the Emperor said amiably as he stood and made his way over to his apprentice, “May I introduce you to my apprentice, Darth Vader. I’m sure you have heard of him?”

It took every ounce of control Padmé possessed to force herself to nod. “Y-yes,” she only stuttered slightly. It certainly hadn’t gone unnoticed, unfortunately. “I have heard of him.”

“Good! Good,” the Emperor cackled. “I was hoping that the two of you could become better acquainted with one another over the course of time.”

Padmé gasped, gawking at Palpatine, while Vader snapped his helmeted head towards his master, but he did not say a word. “What do you mean?” the senator snarled, pushing herself forward against the hold of the troopers, yet trying not make a fool of herself. Don’t let them see anymore weakness! she thought desperately. But what in the galaxy did he mean?

The old man lazily walked back to his throne and sat down, a cruel smirk still adorning his features as he stared down at his apprentice and the senator. After taking what seemed like forever to the fearful senator, Palpatine finally answered. “It seems that there are nasty rumors floating around about you, Senator. We both know the truth about your involvement in the Rebel Alliance, but if these lies about you get out, these terrible fabrications about you being involved, well... your reputation would be ruined, wouldn’t it?”

As she sneered, he went on. “I would hate to see the people turn against you, especially since we have no proof of any involvement you have with the rebels. So, to protect you, and to show my complete confidence in your innocence, I’ve decided to assign Lord Vader as your personal... attendant.”

Padmé was shocked. “What?”

The Emperor chuckled. “You know, you’ve always been my favorite, Amidala,” he mused. “Without your vote of confidence, I might have had to wait longer to become elected chancellor, and then who knows how long I would have had to wait to create the Empire?”

“You can’t do this!” Padmé cried, struggling against the troopers who held her. “I’ve done nothing wrong! You can’t threaten me!”

“Threaten you?” Palpatine’s eyes widened in faux surprise and hurt. “My dear, you misunderstand. I’m assigning my apprentice to you for your protection and to show my support of you.”

“Or to have him watch me,” she growled, finally becoming still.

Although he was still smiling, the air around the Emperor seemed to change as he leaned forward, glaring down at her with those intense, angry yellow eyes. “Why does that concern you? Do you have something to hide?”



There was a time and a place for everything, every fight had to be planned out, and Padmé knew that no matter how she might struggle now, she would not win this time. Palpatine had her no matter what she might try. He could have her killed at that very moment if he wanted to, but he must have decided that it would be better to mess with her for a little while longer instead. She hated this man, she truly did, but there was nothing she could do. No matter what she might say, how she might struggle, at the end of the day, Vader would still be assigned to watch her.

“No,” she replied bitterly, holding the Emperor’s gaze. “Nothing.”

“Good,” the old man nodded slowly before smiling once more. “I’ve taken the liberty of having your things moved into Lord Vader’s home.”

“What?!” Padmé couldn’t control the shriek that came out.

Even Vader seemed to have a hard time with this announcement. “Master?”

Palpatine continued to smile. “Word’s getting around about your arrest, my dear,” he purred. “Can’t take the chance of having someone attack you, believing you’re a traitor. I want to make sure that you’re safe at all times, and what better way than to have you stay with Lord Vader so he can watch and protect you?”

Padmé fought to keep herself in control. She was between wanting to lose herself in a fit of rage and hysterics or vomiting. Neither would help, however, and so she stood there, still in the arms of the troopers, shocked and horrified into silence. Staying with Lord Vader? Staying with Lord Vader?! What did that even mean? What did that entail?

“Now off with you,” the Emperor shooed her away with a hand, as though she was some sort of errant child. “The Storm Troopers will process you out and clear up this terrible mess. Lord Vader will collect you shortly.”

Collect. Padmé shivered at all the implications that that could mean. What sort of collecting did Darth Vader do? Besides collect niches on his lightsaber belt.

There was nothing else she could do now. The Storm Troopers led her away and began the tedious task of processing her out of the detention cell. Vader did not follow as apparently the Emperor was giving a more detailed description of what he expected his apprentice to do while he was... entertaining the senator as his guest. The whole thing was completely absurd! I’m staying with Lord Vader, Padmé thought incredulously. Would she even survive until tomorrow?

But it was about more than just her survival now. What about the Rebel Alliance? What had become of them? She couldn’t make contact with them. Not anymore. Not with Vader going to be breathing down her neck. Probably literally. Communication before had been difficult and risky. It was impossible now. She could always talk to Mon Mothma and Bail Organa when she went to the senate.

But then, how far did Vader’s orders go to ‘look after’ her? Surely he wouldn’t be expected to go with her to work... Would he? And even if he wasn’t going to work with her, security for her would probably skyrocket up and she’d be watched more closely than ever before. How could she even begin to talk to Bail or Mon without being discovered?

More importantly, what would they think once they learned that she would be residing in Lord Vader's residence? Surely they would realize that something had gone very wrong. Surely they'd realize that she was being held prisoner by the Sith?

But deep down, Padmé wasn't so sure. Even if her friends in the senate knew something was up, essentially living with Darth Vader would not look good. At all. There would probably be those that would accuse her of selling out and betraying the rebellion. There would be suspicion and anger directed towards her from the Alliance as it would look like she was fraternizing with the enemy.

Son of a nerf! Padmé's eyes widened in realization. Of course it would look like she was consorting with the enemy! Palpatine knew that. That's why he was doing this. It wasn't just to keep an eye on her and to perhaps get her to crack, it was to make her look bad in the eyes of the rebels while at the same time boosting his support with the populations as it would appear as though the renowned Senator Amidala was now on friendlier terms with the Empire that she had so infamously spoken out against. The Emperor had set it all up to trap her, and she could do nothing to stop it.

I'll think of something, she told herself, if just to keep a little hope alive. He might have me now, but he can't hold me!

Padmé jumped slightly, startled when the doors suddenly burst open and the ominous black figure of Vader strode into the room. He certainly knew how to make an entrance.

Without even looking her way, the Sith commanded, "Let's go," as he continued walking. The senator was surprised, momentarily confused, before a trooper grabbed her by the upper arm and none too gently pushed her forward after Vader. Padmé tried to shake off the rough hand, but couldn't.

It was like a death march through the halls at Vader's neck-breaking pace. Because she was so much shorter, she had to almost run to keep up, and the troopers seemed to almost jog even as the Sith continued to stalk off, unconcerned with the difficulties of the others behind him. I'm doomed, she couldn't help the pessimistic side of herself that flared. If it felt like he was killing her just by walking, what hope did she have at living with him? Whatever that entailed, anyway.

After fifteen minutes or so, they finally made it outside to the landing bay. Padmé almost cried in relief when they stopped a moment as Vader located his personal speeder. Of course it was black, like everything else about the creature, and without a word, he jumped in without the use of a ladder for the tall vehicle with apparent ease. It surprised the senator. Vader looked heavy, sometimes the ground seemed to shake when he walked, but he had jumped as though he was light as a feather. Must have used the Force, she thought to herself. She'd seen Jedi do it in the past.

Thankfully no one expected her to make such a fantastic leap, and the troopers retrieved a ladder for her to use. The other door opened and Padmé was all but pulled inside by the Sith. She was surprised when the troopers didn't follow her up, and even more surprised when she realized that the speeder was only built for two. It was like a sport vehicle for the rich and famous to play with. For some reason, she hadn't imagined Vader with anything that wasn't strictly practical.

Looking over at him warily, Padmé watched as the Sith expertly managed the controls, readjusting everything to fit his bulk more out of habit it looked like than for the fact that it needed to be changed. “Strap in,” he commanded, not bothering to look at his passenger, before the speeder leapt to life, and they were away, streaking across the sky.

A small yelp of surprise was pushed out of Padmé before she could stop it, and she quickly buckled herself in as Vader tore through the skies with reckless speed. And so this is how it all ends, she thought miserably as she watched the military base he called home come closer and closer into view.

## 2. New Home

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I'm going to die.

There was simply no way she was going to make it out of this one. She sat stiffly in the passenger seat of Lord Vader's speeder, streaking across the sky at alarming speeds. But what made it worse than the simple speed was the fact that he seemed to be doing his very best to try and cause an accident of spectacular proportions. He would get very close to one speeder, before ducking down or swerving at the last minute to pass them by. Next he would jump over someone else to get in front, not even looking back while the other drivers would slam on their brakes out of sheer surprise. Did this creature have a death wish?

Without her leave, Padmé gripped the sides of the speeder until her knuckles turned white. She didn't notice how she began to curl up in her seat, bringing her knees up slightly as though to protect herself should they crash — as if it would help. It was the most unnerving thing she'd ever had to do, riding as a passenger in Lord Vader's speeder with him at the helm. All she could think about were what the headlines would say once they discovered the wrecked speeder and her twisted, mutilated corpse, burned to a char and pasted to the side of some building or walkway.

At last they cleared traffic as they came to the private airspace near the military base where she would be staying. Unfortunately, Vader didn't slow down, but instead seemed to speed up as they came closer and closer to the approaching building. Padmé alternated between staring out at the looming building and Vader as they sped up. Could he not see in that helmet of his? Surely that was the only reason for this madness?

When they were almost to the hanger entrance of the base, Padmé couldn't hold her tongue anymore. She'd been literally biting it the entire ride over to stop herself from screaming, but now she just couldn't stop herself. "Slow down!" she cried, bringing her knees all the way up to her chest.

It was with the utmost horror that Padmé watched as the Sith turned his head towards her to stare instead of watching what he was doing. She paled and could see the fear written across her face reflected in the eyes of his helmet. She couldn't look away from him and they stared at one another in silence, the only sound his breathing and the growling of the engine. Again, Padmé wondered what the headlines would say when they found her dead and burned after crashing into the side of the Imperial Military Base with the Dark Lord himself beside her. For many years to come it would surely be a great mystery as to why Senator Amidala had been riding along in Lord Vader's speeder. With her luck, however, Vader would probably survive and only she'd be killed. Maybe that was the Emperor's evil plot all along. Make it look like an accident.

But at the last minute, just before rushing to meet their doom, with impossible speed and precision, all the while with not turning back to look at what he was doing, the Sith dropped the speeder down and began hitting the brakes while pressing the controls to get ready for their landing. The senator gasped as they just missed hitting the top of the hanger bay entrance. Her eyes closed on their own accord, but she could feel the speeder slowing down

until, blessedly, it came to a hard stop which lurched her forward in her seat. When she managed to peel open her eyes again, she found Lord Vader still staring at her, appearing completely unfazed.

She was shaking, but honestly, Padme didn't care. She was just glad that she was alive and not pasted to the side of the base. She stared back at Vader, who seemed frozen, his respirator still hissing steadily, even as her own breath came out in short little gasps. Padmé had never been afraid of flying before, but Force, she was when it came to this creature! She had never known anyone could fly like that before. Was this just some sort of strange torture? To scare the shit out of someone to get them to slip? The idea had merit.

It took several moments before the senator could pry her hands off of the side arm rests and flex them a few times to restore circulation. When she was able to detach herself from the speeder, she turned to look back at Vader only to find that he had gotten out of the speeder and was stalking across the hanger towards the lift door. Momentarily stunned by his rudeness — no one having treated her like this since before she was Queen of Naboo— Padmé scrambled out of the speeder. Thankful there was a ladder by her side of the door and she wasn't shaking so bad that she couldn't walk. Once down, she literally ran after the Sith, pushing her hair out of her eyes.

She made it to his side just before the door to the lift closed. He was apparently impatient to get to wherever they were going. She panted for a moment, still messing with her hair, before scowling up at the creature in black. He towered over her and did not look at her again. His breathing continued to be the only communication between them that filled their awkward ride up into the living quarters of the base. She just hoped now that she wasn't going to be put into some prison, though she wouldn't exactly put it past this creature. He was known for his torture and not for his house parties. Briefly she wondered if she was the first person to ever come here as Vader's 'guest' not in chains.

When the lift stopped and the door slid open, Padmé half expected to find herself in a dark depressing room filled with torture devices and cobwebs, but strangely, that was not the case. Instead she found herself in a pretty normal, if bland, room that was probably a meeting room for generals and the like when they came to make reports to Vader. It was composed of dark greys, blacks, and whites, but overall it was a clean, efficient looking room with a long, black glass table and black leather chairs to fit thirty or perhaps a little more. The walls were rather bare white, with only the large window that over looked the city to relieve the dullness and a picture of the emperor on the opposite wall with a few pictures of ship designs spread out, which actually made the room look bigger somehow, though she didn't know how.

Vader was apparently not interested in showing off this room, however, as he soon began his maddeningly large strides out of the lift and towards the door on the opposite side of the room. Dutifully Padmé followed, not knowing what else she was supposed to do. She was afraid that should she do something wrong, she would get punished sooner. Besides, the longer she was under her own power that meant that she could think and map out possible escape routes. It was her main objective at the moment to memorize all that she could about this place and survive. The information might serve the Alliance one day.

The hallway was designed similarly to the meeting room, plain and clinical like some sort of creepy hospital. It almost looked empty, like no one had moved in yet, truly showing off how new it, and in return the Empire, really was. There were no real pictures anywhere

except an occasional of the Emperor, as though it was mandatory to have one every so often, and of course, the Imperial logo.

Vader didn't leave her much time to look around, however, as he swept through the base with frightening speed across the shining white polished floor. Padmé noted how others in the building made sure to clear the way when they saw the Sith coming towards them.

At last, after twisting and turning through hallway after hallway—Padmé suspecting that the Sith was trying to get her lost on purpose—they came to a lift that they took up that finally brought them to what the senator suspected to be Vader's personal wing considering the lack of anyone or anything. There was a large picture window that opened up to a balcony as soon as they stepped out of the lift at one side as if the night life of Coruscant was displayed just for Vader before there were a line of rooms all with unmarked doors. It appeared to be like every other hallway she'd seen thus far, with the exception that there was finally a dead end straight ahead. All the way at the end was a large black door that looked heavily secured. There was no one on this level, not even a droid, and Padmé knew that this had to be their destination. They walked to the middle of the many doors before Vader finally came to a halt.

"You may eat in this room," he pointed with one massive gloved hand towards the left to one of the unmarked doors. 'Your room is just there,' he pointed to the right. "If you should need anything, ask a droid." As if anticipating its master's word, a golden protocol droid appeared beside the Sith from out of Padmé's supposed room. "Do not attempt to enter that door," Vader pointed to the largest door at the far end. "You would not find it a pleasant experience."

Is he threatening me? she thought uncomfortably.

"You have full freedom of this wing," he continued, surprising the senator greatly. 'There are holocams in every room, as well as the rest of the base, and you will be monitored at all times. However,' a menacing bite came into his voice. Unconsciously, Padmé recoiled from him. "—you will find that my speeders can only be accessed with my own personal codes and the doors to the lower levels always remained locked and guarded by Storm Troopers. The only way out is through speeder or having the proper identification or pass to get through the check points."

"So I am a prisoner," Padmé muttered with a scowl, not sure how she should feel exactly at the moment.

"If that is how you wish to look at it," Vader replied dispassionately. "Stay out of my way. I do not care much what you do."

As he turned to leave, Padmé suddenly felt a thrill of panic rush through her. "Wait!" For whatever reason, she didn't like the idea of the Sith leaving. At least having Vader there with her she knew where he was and what he was doing which saved her the worry of wondering what he was planning and what he was going to do to her. When the Emperor's Shadow paused, Padmé had to think fast to come up with something reasonable to detain the Sith. Everyone knew of his infamous impatience. "Y-you said that there are holocams everywhere?" It was one of the few things she could still remember from the hasty speech.

"That is correct."

“Even in my room?”

“Correct.”

Padmé scowled. “Not in the ’fresher though, surely?”

“Everywhere,” Vader replied, sounding almost bored.

“That’s unacceptable!” she shrieked, glaring up at him. “I will not have cams there while I’m bathing and changing! That’s disgusting and perverted!”

The Dark Lord took a menacing step forward, and only then did Padmé truly remember her position. She had no room to argue, and yet here she was. She never really was good at keeping quiet. “A droid will be monitoring your activities. I neither have the time nor the inclination to watch you, Senator,” he spat. Padmé wasn’t sure, but she believed she was more insulted than relieved.

“That doesn’t mean that one of the other servants or personnel won’t walk into the observation room for a show,” she snapped, posting her hands on her hips. Where she kept getting this audacity from, she’d never know. Maybe someday she’d live long enough to regret it.

“There is no one else here in my personal wing, Senator,” Vader snapped, his patience having finally come to an end. Padmé could literally feel it. “I keep only droids.”

Her own anger stalled. “Oh.”

Well, she really shouldn’t be that surprised. After all, no one knew what Vader really was. Rumor had it that he was probably just a droid himself, though Padmé was more prone to think that he might be some sort of cyborg. How else was it that he was able to possess Force powers? Droids couldn’t have the Force, only living things. And they didn’t need a respirator either. But that still didn’t clear up the question of what sort of species the Sith was. He was so tall that most believed he couldn’t be human despite all of the Emperor’s pro-human campaigns. Vader was probably just a puppet in that, too. But the Emperor, although he didn’t come right out and say it, seemed to be making an orderly galaxy for humans. Would Vader really follow Palpatine if he wasn’t human?

But she could think on that later. At the moment, Padmé found herself face to chest plate with the Sith, and she couldn’t bring herself to stare into his masked visage. What was he hiding under there? Was he some sort of species that couldn’t handle the oxygen environment and the common atmosphere, or had he been in some sort of accident? She didn’t know and at the moment she didn’t care. All she wanted to do was get out of here and go back to her apartment.

“How long will I be staying here?” she asked quietly.

“As long as need be.”

“And how long is that?” she pushed, staring down at her reflection from the floor.

Padmé was shocked when a gloved hand came to rest under her chin, forcing her to look up. She was disgusted, terrified, and furious that the Sith dare touch her, but what could she do? Darth Vader could kill her with a thought and he was certainly bigger and stronger than her besides. If he wanted to touch her, he would, and it sickened Padmé to think about.

“If you are a good little girl,” Vader rumbled, “perhaps only several years. If not, then expect forever.”

“Forever?!” The senator stepped back, out of his touch, appalled. “Y-you can’t keep me locked away here forever! I have work to do! I-I didn’t even do anything! When the senate finds ou—”

“Don’t take me for a fool!” Vader’s sudden explosion of anger caught the senator off guard, and she was once again reminded of at whose mercy she found herself under. ‘We both know that you’re hiding your involvement in the Rebel Alliance, and the moment you slip,’ he lowered his voice into a deathly calm, stabbing a finger out at her, “you will be dragged to the prison to be interrogated, and I’ll see to it personally how long it takes before you scream.”

Once more without her leave, Padmé shivered in dread and she couldn’t stop shaking. Vader was dispassionate towards her plight, however, and turned to stalk away down the hall and into the room that he had instructed her not to go. She didn’t dare follow, didn’t dare speak up again. She’d pushed her luck as far as it went today. Even she knew that. Part of staying alive here meant knowing just how far she could press the Sith, and it was apparently not very far.

Tears suddenly burned her eyes, but Padmé refused to let them fall. There were stories on Naboo about ancient days when young virgins had to be sacrificed to evil monsters, spirited away to their lairs, never to be seen or heard from again. No one had ever bothered to write about what happened to those poor girls once they entered the demon’s lair. It was assumed that they were tortured before killed and devoured. Looking around, in this dark place, where she was beginning to feel the evil permeating the air, Padmé couldn’t help but believe that she would find out just how the virgins’ stories ended even after the books had closed.

She was about to just sit down on the floor and try not to hyperventilate, when the golden protocol droid that had remained silent came shuffling forward in front of her. “Hello, milady,” it said in an oddly precocious manner. “I am See-Threepio, human-cyborg relations.”

It was so polite, so academic sounding that Padmé could do little but blink. “Hi.”

“And who might you be, milady?”

Padmé stood a moment, pondering how such a polite device had managed to survive here in the military base and in service to Lord Vader’s personal wing, no less. “I’m Senator Amidala,” she introduced herself halfheartedly.

“I see, Mistress Amidala,” 3PO bowed slightly. “I have been instructed by my master to assist you to the best of my abilities. How might I serve you?”

This was... weird. Anything that belonged to or worked for Lord Vader was not supposed to be this well-mannered. Such droids were programmed to make beings as comfortable as possible, doing any sort of tasks that might be too laborious or bothersome. It just didn’t sit right with Padmé that one of Vader’s droids was being so gracious. It... just wasn’t right. Not here. Not within the most evil place she could think of.

“Umm...” she bit her lip, the tears in her eyes already starting to disappear. ‘C-could you show me which one is my room?’ she asked. “He—Lord Vader—said it was right through



here?”

“Oh yes, Mistress Amidala!” the droid exclaimed in apparent delight. “I was ordered to prepare it myself for your use. Please, follow me.”

The senator found herself following the golden machine into the room that Vader had only vaguely pointed towards. It was large, she was a bit surprised to see, with no bars on the windows, nor chains laying around. There were no cobwebs and no dust. It was an ordinary, if plain, bedroom. The walls were pure white and the floors were the same clean black from out in the hall. The curtains were a pitch black satin, while there was a matching black bedspread. The bed was actually quite large and comfortable looking with big fluffy pillows. There were black glass side tables and the closet doors were the same black as the floor. Behind another door, she could just make out the 'fresher, designed similarly to the rest of the room. It was all so spotlessly clean and militaristic, being at the same time everything and nothing at all like what Padmé thought the home of Darth Vader would look like.

“Your things were brought by earlier, milady,” 3PO explained, still standing beside the door. “I took the liberty of putting them away for you.”

“O-okay.”

“Is there anything else you desire, milady?”

This was just too unreal. “No. Thank you, Threepio.”

The droid bowed slightly before shuffling out the door. “If you should need anything at all, milady, I am yours to command.”

And with that, he was gone, leaving Padmé feeling more confused than she ever had been in her life. She plopped down on the bed to find that it was indeed as comfortable as it looked. Unreal.

She was here, in Darth Vader's personal wing within the Imperial Military Base, sitting on a comfortable bed, in a clean and efficient looking bedroom, with free range of the entire upper portion of the base, with her own personal droid to tend to her. This could not be real. This had to be a dream. There was just no way that a Sith Lord would be courteous enough and polite enough to entertain a guest even a fraction as well as what he was now. Especially one that he knew had connections with his enemies. This had to be some sort of trap, to lower her guard. But it wouldn't work. No, she knew how the game was played, and she'd be damned before she let Vader or Palpatine get the better of her.

Lying back on her bed, the senator closed her eyes and just took a moment to breathe and collect herself. She had to think, think of a plan to get out of here, to get back to the Alliance, to get away from Vader. But first, she needed to rest. She'd had a busy day, one filled with too much stress and surprises. After that she could plan. And she would. She just needed to close her eyes...

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Despite his earlier claims, Vader found himself in the control room attached to his personal chambers, watching the cam in the senator's bedroom. He had listened to the exchange between C-3PO and the senator, and had studied the woman's face extensively. She was wary,

skeptical of the considerations being shown to her while a virtual prisoner in his home. Vader wasn't surprised. He would be too if he were in her position. Sidious railed on about the girl's naïve nature and how they could lull her into false security, but the younger Sith couldn't help but be doubtful. The senator was willing to give beings the benefit of the doubt perhaps, but she was not stupid. It was perfectly clear to Vader that the senator was already on to Sidious's plot to get her to drop her guard and make a critical mistake. It didn't take a genius, actually. It made him wonder if his own master was slipping.

This is not going to work, Vader thought as he sat back in his chair. His master was a fool for expecting the girl to just relax and give up all that she knew. While not the most politically minded, Vader still did not understand why his master hadn't just allowed him to torture information out of her. Surely it would be easier than this whole convoluted plan about getting her make a mistake and say the wrong thing or—Force forbid—trust them. The senator had a strong mind, that the Sith could not deny, but it could not stand up to his powers when he was intent on gaining information. Vader had run across Jedi, beings with vast mental training, and torn their minds to shreds within minutes. Senator Amidala didn't stand a chance against him and his torture techniques.

So why play this game? Was this some sort of test?

Vader scowled at the thought. He didn't like being tested by his master. Not like this. It was insulting and a complete waste of time. Surely he'd proven himself by now? He'd thought destroying the Jedi Order had done that. Surely his master knew that he was a fully-fledged Sith? He had been for years! So why have him dance around the senator, wasting time? It just didn't make sense.

It was clear that after a few minutes the girl was asleep. Only then did Vader relax. He almost smirked when he recalled how frightened she'd been of his driving. It had clearly worn her out. It had not been his aim to scare her, he'd simply been impatient to get back home and get work done, but it was certainly a bonus to watch her shrink into a tiny ball. He hadn't really believed it when he'd seen it, the Great Senator Amidala curled up like an infant. Hilarious. Who would have thought she didn't like flying?

But he could not waste time sitting here when there was work to be done. Especially if his mind was wondering uselessly to such topics as the senator. No, he had work to do. Battle plans to finalize. There was no time for thinking about the tiny woman that was just several doors down.

Standing, Vader stalked out of his chambers, making sure they were locked securely, before he made his way towards the lift. He had orders to give before there were several meetings with generals. When he came to the lower levels, to where the offices were, he searched out his personal assistant. The young man was usually a nervous, fidgety sort of fellow, but he got the job done efficiently, and that was all Vader could have asked for.

"Lieutenant Pilor," he snapped.

Almost instantly the lieutenant seemed to materialize before him, doing his best not to look as terrified as Vader sensed him to be. "My lord."

Turning towards his assistant, the Sith wasted no time before making known his requests. "Lieutenant, I am hosting a special guest in my personal wing," he began, ignoring the

surprise that passed over the other man's face. "Senator Amidala of Naboo will be staying with us for an indeterminable amount of time."

"Yes, my lord." Pilor might have been easy to read, but he thankfully was not one that questioned orders or voiced his inner musings. It would be a shame for Vader to lose his temper and kill the man.

"See to it that if she leaves my personal wing that she is monitored and has armed escorts so she does not get into anything she should not."

"Yes, my lord. I shall send notice to all troopers and personnel."

"Good." Vader paused another moment. "And be sure to watch all exit points and my hanger more closely. She is not to leave this base unless I or anyone I give specific permission to takes her."

"Of course, my lord. Is there anything else, Sir?"

Pilor was certainly a rare one. The man was certainly an asset and had thus far only ever managed to annoy Vader every so often. That was better than his last P.A. who met an unfortunate end when he had not done his work adequately, causing Vader's entire schedule to become backed up, wasting his time. This lieutenant was quick, obedient, and intelligent enough to ask all the right questions at all the right times. It was refreshing.

So, Vader thought a moment over the question, before looping his fingers into his belt. "Yes," he said at last. "Be sure that when you alert personnel to her existence, it is understood that her presence must be kept quiet. The Emperor would be most displeased should everyone find out she is staying with us too soon. If any word gets out and I find that it was someone in this building, I will personally see to their punishment. Is that understood?"

The lieutenant lost a shade or two of color, but nodded quickly. "Yes, my lord. I will see to it immediately."

"Good."

Vader turned, leaving his P.A to carry out his orders as he went to his meeting with several generals about the war that had broken out among a few mid-rim worlds. The Sith had never understood rebels, and he could not fathom why they resisted the Empire. Were they so barbaric that they preferred the chaos and uncertainty of governing themselves over the security and order of the Empire?

Animals. All of them.

And so, for the next several hours, Vader turned his full attention towards maintaining and protecting the Empire he and his master had created. Not once did he think back to the woman that was left sleeping in his personal wing, nor of how much his life could change because of her.

### 3. Trapped

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The next morning Padmé had the displeasure of peeling open her eyes to find that the sun was shining in them annoyingly. As she sat up, she felt her head spin slightly, causing her feel more disoriented than she already was. She didn't remember going to bed last night and she felt disgusting. Looking down, she saw she was still wearing her clothes from the day before. That explained some of it.

Padmé sat straight up when she noticed she was not in her own room. This room was completely neutral and sterile. Events from the day before came rushing back to her, and for a moment, she thought maybe she was in some sort of prison or holding cell. No, she remembered she was somewhere far worse. This was not the normal prison. This room was in Darth Vader's personal wing at the Imperial Military Base. By order of the Emperor himself, she was to stay here as the personal guest of the Supreme Commander of the Imperial Navy.

A moment later saw her staggering to the 'fresher, desperately trying not to become ill at the thought of her imprisonment. How could this have happened? Staring at herself in the mirror, the senator realized she'd gone completely pale, and despite having slept longer than usual, she had bags under her eyes. Obviously even though she did not remember them wholly, she hadn't had pleasant dreams. The events of the previous day had really taken a toll on her more than she had previously thought.

Sighing, she walked back out into the bedroom glaring down at her reflection from the floor. As explained last night, a lot of her wardrobe was in the closet, though Padmé noted in slight distress, not everything she owned had been brought over. She hoped they hadn't gotten rid of it. While she would not consider herself a particularly vain being, she did admit that her one true weakness was her wardrobe. If she never saw the rest of her clothes again that was fine, but her only hope was that they hadn't destroyed any of it.

But she could not dwell on the negative or she would be here all day without having gotten a thing accomplished... other than cursing the Empire and its leaders. Right now she had to rally her spirits. She tried to tell herself that prison would've been so much worse than this and that she was lucky she was apparently so important that the Emperor couldn't just get rid of her like he could so many others he had in the past. At least she was still able to go to work and was able to have some of her clothes.

Focusing on the positive was starting to annoy Padmé, so she decided to just grab a dress and some of her other dressings and lock herself in the 'fresher to get ready for the day. When everything was collected and she was locked in, the conversation with Lord Vader from the previous night invaded her mind. There were cams everywhere, even in here. The thought still sickened her, infuriated her, but she had to trust that what the Sith had said was correct and that only a droid was monitoring her. She immediately snorted at the thought, however. Trust Lord Vader? Not in this or any other universe.

So, making sure there was a towel waiting for her, Padmé stripped down quickly and jumped into the shower. The water was blessedly warm, and thankfully all of her soaps had been brought from home and were arranged similarly to how she had had them, so she didn't

have to hunt for anything too extensively. That droid really had gone through a lot of trouble to make her feel at home here despite that being an impossible task.

As the warm water pelted her gently, the senator stood under the spray, mind running through everything that could possibly happen to her while her body was on automatic. The Emperor had made it sound like yesterday that Vader would be following her around from now on. But how could that be possible? Everyone knew that Darth Vader was probably the busiest being in the galaxy, even more so than the Emperor himself! The masked Sith was the spearhead of the Imperial Navy and Army more often than not. Vader oversaw battle preparations, commanded troops, helped plan alongside the Emperor on how to rule the galaxy. Vader had a real hand in pretty much everything there was to do in the Empire, surely he would be too busy to follow her around all the time? Why, she'd heard rumors from several officers in the navy that Vader would call regularly throughout the early hours of the morning to talk about work, meaning he didn't sleep regularly. If he was so busy he could barely take time to rest, how could he follow her around?

This was more confusing than it should have been. When the shower was turned off and she had rung out her hair, Padmé stuck out an arm, groping for the towel. She wrapped it around herself before getting. It was an entirely awkward affair to try and get her undergarments on while still keeping the towel up as a shield. It bordered on ridiculous, but she refused to give anyone or anything a show. It became apparent, though, that she couldn't get into her dress and still hold the towel. She was going to have to let it go. A disturbing thought, but at least the most important parts were covered. So, taking a deep breath, she dropped the towel while simultaneously grabbing and slipping her dress on over her head. After a few minutes of struggling to get the heavy garment on, she was fully covered.

This was too much work just to change. It tired just as much as it angered Padmé to be reduced to this. But still, if it meant that no Imperial dogs would see her, then it might be worth it. She didn't trust Vader any farther than she could throw him, and she had the disturbing fear that some sort of officer would walk into the control room and see her. It was humiliating and violating.

But she didn't want to think about that. Grabbing her comb, she began the laborious task of doing her hair. After about five minutes or so of combing, she sat down on the bed, about ready to call out to Dormé only to come to the horrible realization that her handmaiden wasn't here. What had happened to the other woman? Had she been imprisoned? Was she all right? Yet another reason why she could easily slip into despair.

That wouldn't get her anywhere either, nor would it help her friend. So instead, the senator began drying her hair herself, and tried to remember how her handmaiden always managed to do her hair so well. It had literally been a decade since Padmé had had to do this on her own and go out into society. She had so much thick hair that for a moment she wondered how she was ever going to look decent again if she was the one doing it. Maybe this was how she could rescue her friend? Maybe she could plead to Lord Vader and ask him to bring Dormé here with her? At least then she wouldn't be so lonely and she could have someone to talk to. She doubted anyone else in the base would so much as glance at her if they knew the exact reasons for her stay.

Eventually she decided to just leave her hair down, only tying the sides back so that it was out of her face. She was almost finished with her makeup when the door com sounded. It

startled the senator before she rose and answered it. She immediately wished she hadn't.

Vader stood on the other side, his arms crossed over his chest severely. The first thing out of his mouth was not the typical 'Good morning,' but a rather impatient, "Are you ready yet?"

Normally if someone had spoken to her in such a rude tone, the former queen might have reprimanded them, perhaps even remind them of just to whom they were speaking. But she had the sinking feeling that connections or lineage wouldn't matter much to the creature before her. He was obviously not in a good mood... not that she thought he could be in one, but he was certainly in a mood where she believed she couldn't push her luck as she had the previous night. He'd been tame yesterday in comparison to this, she could feel it, so it was best to just leave it be.

"N-nearly," she nodded. She hated how badly he could scare her just by standing there. It wasn't really her fault, though. When one could feel the hate and angry rolling off of him, as if it was somehow tangible, fear was a perfectly natural response.

When he continued to stare, Padmé realized he was expecting her to finish. And quickly. So she obliged.

Turning back to her room, she rushed to the fresher and began finishing up her makeup. After another couple minutes, she returned into the bedroom and found the door still open and Vader's bulk still filling it, looking exactly as he had before. Obviously he didn't believe in privacy — although that had been established right at the start last night. She scowled at him, but it didn't faze him. Not that she thought it would.

"Let's go," he commanded, turning from the doorway.

Padmé glared after him, but rushed to catch up. She supposed that she didn't have to worry about locking the door. She doubted anyone would come up to Lord Vader's wing at all, let alone steal anything from it. Not unless they wanted to die a horrible, painful death at the hands of the monster himself.

When they reached the lift, Padmé was distressed to find that the Sith took up most of the room. She hadn't noticed this last evening. Apparently he was the only one that used this particular one since it was to his wing. She was forced to stand closer to him than she would have liked, nearly touching him. The awkwardness was probably only on her side, but she had to fight hard not to squirm or simply fall over dead.

When they reached a public floor, he began his mad dash across base, Padmé having to follow him at a jog. She was annoyed that she had to rush. It certainly didn't do anything for the regal image that she'd worked so hard to manage. But she tried her best and kept an air of authority about her, which didn't seem to go unnoticed by several personnel who stared at her oddly. Apparently they never thought they'd see the famous Senator Amidala and the infamous Darth Vader together.

As they were walking to who knew where, a young man came rushing up beside the Sith, pad in hand and pen at the ready. "My lord," he began, not sparing Padmé a single glance. "I have rearranged everything you had asked, but I am having trouble with the meeting with Admiral Yimano."

“Yimano is a fool,” Vader snapped. “Have him send his report to spare me the tediousness of his presentation.”

The senator was momentarily taken back by the abuse directed at the absent admiral, but then again, she knew she shouldn’t be. This was Darth Vader, after all. It was just strange, though. She’d never thought he would be so readily insulting towards someone who obviously held the Empire in such high esteem, especially in front of her. For whatever reason she’d always imagined that Imperials stuck to Imperials closely. Apparently Vader didn’t stick to anyone closely.

The young officer, again, didn’t seem fazed and merely nodded as he wrote something down. “Very good, my lord. Is there anything else you would require?”

“You have your instructions,” Vader said simply. “Should anything change, com me immediately.”

“Yes, my lord,” the lieutenant bowed his head slightly before dropping back and allowing them to pass by. It was only then that he looked at Padmé. Strangely enough, she found a slight expression of pity on his face before he turned and strode away to supposedly do as the Sith had commanded. Unsurprisingly, she didn’t feel any better than when she’d woken.

Finally, however, after more walking, turning, and staring, they made it to the hanger. The day before Padmé had been recovering from her trauma over the flight and had not noticed much about it. Now that she did, however, she realized just how massive it was. There were ships of all different shapes and sizes parked all around. She wasn’t really a ship or speeder enthusiast, but she was fairly certain that if she were, this would have been paradise. This was obviously Vader’s personal hanger, and she was surprised to see the collection he had amassed from all across the galaxy. He was apparently a speed fanatic, which explained his horrifying piloting yesterday.

Realizing this, Padmé stopped dead when they exited the lift. It took only a second for Vader to sense that she wasn’t trailing behind him anymore. When he looked back, she shook her head. “I’m not getting in anything with you at the controls.”

If he was angry or not, she couldn’t tell, but she did ready herself for anything when he came striding back to her. Instead of yelling as she would have thought, he grabbed her by the upper arm in a tight grip, dragging her forward. It was the ultimate indignity, especially with troopers and mechanics staring at them, but Padmé couldn’t free herself, and so had to suffer.

Thankfully today Vader chose a speeder with a roof and ramp. He pushed Padmé in, and she noted it was a standard issued Imperial speeder. Nothing fancy. She wondered why. Maybe he was afraid that she’d vomit in one of his nicer speeders like she almost had yesterday? The thought was annoying more than relieving. It wasn’t her fault! If he hadn’t been driving like a maniac—

“I would keep your thoughts quieter if I were you, Senator.”

Padmé jumped, spinning around in the passenger seat to stare at the Sith. “W-what?”

Although she had never thought it was possible, Vader seemed....amused. “Your anger is projecting your thoughts rather loudly. I can hear what you’re thinking.”

The senator paled. “You can read minds?”

“Yes.”

Silence enveloped them as Vader began the warm up sequence for the speeder, before Padmé finally found the courage to speak. “Have you been listening to them the whole time?”

“No,” he replied shortly. “I can only hear them if I actively seek to or if someone’s emotions are particularly strong. And only then if they have a strong presence in the Force.”

The senator almost scoffed. “Are you trying to tell me I’m like a Jedi?”

“If you were like a Jedi,” Vader began calmly, ‘I would have killed you instantly.’ Padmé blanched at the thought. “Every creature has a Force presence,” Vader continued to explain as he lifted the speeder into the air. “The intensity of the sensitivity is what can give a being powers such as the Sith or the former Jedi.”

Well. An education on the Force was certainly not what Padmé had been expecting to receive this morning, especially from Lord Vader. It had almost been a civil conversation, despite how creeped out she was at the fact that he could listen to her thoughts. She’d been around Jedi enough in her younger years, but never once had one complained about her thoughts being too loud. She hadn’t really believed that that sort of power had been real. Apparently she’d been wrong.

With nothing else to say or do, the rest of the speeder trip was ridden in silence. Vader still drove like a speed-fiend, but it wasn’t as bad as the day before. Apparently the Sith was impatient when it came to doing pretty much anything, she was discovering. If they paused for only a moment in traffic, Vader would simply fly in restricted air space and zoom forward as though nothing was amiss. Several times Padmé thought she saw air security chase after them or take pictures, but that didn’t seem to bother the Sith. He was second only to the Emperor himself. He didn’t worry about trivial things like traffic violations.

At last, when they made it to the Senate building, Padmé was pleased that she hadn’t curled up into a ball this time. The only sign of her nervousness were her nails digging into the armrests. But that was a vast improvement from the other day.

True to his disregard for everyone else, Vader parked in Senator Villius’s space, and turned off the speeder before she could have protested. It was probably best not to say anything anyway. Again, Padmé could sense the Sith’s darkening mood. He didn’t like the senate. She’d forgotten about all the rumors surrounding Vader’s notorious hatred for politicians. This assignment to watch her, she realized, was probably just as much of a disturbance and annoyance to him as it was to her. The thought made her feel a little bit better.

As they disembarked from the speeder, security came rushing over, probably to tell them that they’d parked in the wrong place. But the moment they saw Vader, they stopped cold and saluted. The Sith didn’t bother to even look at them as he stalked forward towards the building. Padmé once more followed behind, feeling much like a child trailing behind a parent. It was a feeling she hadn’t had since she was around thirteen. Very disconcerting.

When they made it inside, however, Padmé decided that enough was enough. The military base might have been Vader’s domain, but this was hers. Instead, she rushed to get in front of the creature in black, cutting him off, before taking the lead and controlling the pace. She wondered if he was shocked or annoyed, but she didn’t really care at the moment.



Surprisingly, however, Vader followed along with her little plan, but instead of following, he stepped up beside her. Equals then. She could accept that. They were almost to her office when she saw Bail Organa and Mon Mothma standing to the side. The moment they laid eyes on her, it was clear that they were worried.

"I have business," she muttered to her captor, before walking over to her friends.

When she reached them, she smiled reassuringly. "Good morning," she spoke casually. "How are you?"

The other two senators stared at her for a moment, before Bail smiled back. "Well. We, ah, heard talk that you had... well, that there had been some sort of... misunderstanding yesterday."

So they had heard. She was about to reassure them, to try and tell them what happened, when the chilling sound of a respirator filled the air. Without her leave, the young woman's eyes slid shut in frustrated defeat. She couldn't say anything. Not with him here. Not even to tell her friends that she was all right and that everything was safe.

"Lord Vader," Mon was the first to recover. "Good morning, Sir. What brings you here to the senate so early in the morning?"

The Sith didn't bother to reply. Instead, he stared at the three senators for just a moment before grabbing Padmé by the arm, dragging her away. It hurt. She struggled with him for a moment, only to stop once she realized they were being stared at by other people. She debated with herself about which looked worse, being dragged by Lord Vader quietly, or struggling with him until he lost his temper and either Force choked her or threw her kicking and screaming over his shoulder. Neither sounded too appealing, but before she could decide, they were outside her office suite.

Without touching them, Vader caused the doors to burst open. All around, startled Naboo delegates looked up to find their senator being pulled in by the infamous Sith Lord. Several cried out in alarm and protest, but that didn't stop Vader. Instead, the creature managed to get all the way to the other side of the room, to her office doors, before he finally came to a stop. He ripped open the door with the Force and shoved her in roughly. Padmé stumbled forward, unused to such treatment, and she tripped over her long dress. When the door slammed shut and all she could hear was that infernal respirator, she knew she was trapped.

When she had steadied herself, she turned and almost ran into the chest of the Sith. How had he gotten beside her so quickly? She was about to protest his treatment, when a gloved hand shot out and grabbed her by the neck. Padmé's eyes went wide in terror. She began trembling, but didn't say a word.

"I have questions, your highness," the Sith growled. "And you will answer them."

She couldn't even nod her consent, but Vader must have realized she was agreeing with him. Unfortunately, he didn't let go of her throat. He had her trapped.

"What are Senators Organa and Mothma to you?" he demanded.

Padmé was almost afraid to speak, but realized that he wasn't really choking her, just applying enough pressure to remind her that he could. Very easily. "Th-they're friends," she said simply.

“What kind of friends?”

A sarcastic remark might have come before, but not now. Not with this creature. One wrong word and he could easily kill her. “Just friends. O-our planets have similar agendas.”

“Rebellious agendas?” He applied more pressure.

How could she have been so stupid? Going to Bail and Mon with Vader right behind her was like rushing off to the Rebel Base knowing she had a tracking device on her ship. She’d been so relieved to see them, and had wanted to tell them she was all right, that she hadn’t thought about how it might look. How could she have been so stupid?!

“No,” she croaked as he began putting more pressure on her throat when she didn’t answer immediately. “J-just friends... I wanted to... to tell them I was... okay.”

“Any why would they think you were not ‘okay’?” He squeezed tighter.

Tears sprang up in her eyes. Was she really going to die like this? Funny, yesterday she hadn’t been afraid to die. But perhaps it was the presence of the Sith Lord that made the fear come alive. She could feel his anger, his hate, and to stare into those pitiless black sockets that reflected her horror and pain was too much. She’d been ready yesterday, she wasn’t today. And now she had possibly condemned her friends as well.

“W-word... gets... out,” she gasped, finally raising her hands to grip at his much larger one in the vain hope that she could make him let her go. “Emper-or said... word gets... out.” Her vision was beginning to darken around the edges, and just when she thought she was going to pass out, Vader let go.

Padmé gasped for air just as she collapsed to the floor, her legs weak. She spent several moments gasping, gently touching her neck, as though to protect it, before she looked up at the creature standing over her with tears now readily streaming from her eyes. He stared down at her for a moment, not a trace of remorse evident, before he turned and strode from the room.

The doors once more burst open and he strode out with his insanely large stride, leaving Padmé shaking as she sat on the floor, watching him. All the others were watching with wide eyes as the Sith retreated, before they turned back towards the office he had just evacuated. The instant they saw the senator on the ground, they all began rushing to her aid.

In the front were Dormé and Jar Jar, who were beside her in an instant, kneeling next to her. “My lady!” Dormé cried.

“Are yousa okiee-day?” the Gungan asked full of concern.

Seeing their genuine panic and worry was just too much. Padmé now felt so cold after coming into such close proximity to the Sith, to death, that now that she could clearly recall what warmth felt like, she broke. Would she ever feel such love again? She began sobbing and buried her face into Dormé’s shoulder, hugging her helplessly. Jar Jar began to rub her back, even as thechandmaiden stroked her hair.

“Shh, it’s all right,” Dormé cooed. “He’s gone. He can’t hurt you now.”

Oh, if only they knew. He could hurt her, now and later. He had retreated for the time being, but he would be back. She was trapped, trapped in the world of the Sith, and she

couldn't get out. She couldn't get out. The thought caused her to cry harder. When was the last time she'd cried? It must have been years and years.

Vaguely she wondered if she should get used to this as she didn't try to stop the tears.

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A few hours later saw the return of the Sith Lord. Everyone in the office suite froze upon his arrival. Padmé, who had left her office doors open, watching blankly as he strode in, not bothering to move from her seated position. If he wanted her to stand, he could certainly make her.

Instead of barking out orders or making threats, Vader strode back into her office and stood before her desk. He turned his masked gaze towards Dormé and Jar Jar, who had stayed near since Vader's last appearance. "Get. Out," he snarled.

Despite his loyalty, Jar Jar was an easily startled, scared individual, and the moment the Sith had turned his helmeted head towards the Gungan, Jar Jar was already scrambling to his feet to get away. He didn't have to be told twice. Dormé, however, was a bit more stubborn than that, and was especially unwilling to leave her mistress's side considering what had happened not too long ago.

The handmaiden scowled as she stood and stepped towards the Sith, her expression giving away her anger. "How dare you—"

But by then, Vader was already raising his hand in a clasp gesture. Padmé had heard enough rumors to know what it meant and couldn't stand the thought of her friend dying because Vader wasn't in a good mood. "Dormé!" she cried, standing as well. The handmaiden trailed off, turning a concerned gaze upon her mistress. 'Dormé,' Padmé began again, more calmly this time. "Why don't you go see to those reports I asked about a while ago."

The other woman looked extremely reluctant to leave, but at Padmé insistent gaze, she finally nodded. "Yes, milady," she bowed before walking out.

The moment her feet passed through the threshold, Vader slammed the doors closed. Padmé made sure to keep her expression blank. This monster had already scared her, he couldn't do much more than he already had. At least not in the way that would reduce her to a sobbing mess again. Last time she hadn't been ready. She was ready this time.

"Lord Vader," she said evenly as a way of opening.

He didn't need much more prompting. "It appears that word of your arrest reached the senate last evening," he began, looping his thumbs in his belt. "I have corrected the reports and informed all that your arrest was the result of a rebel attempt to get rid of you, that you were merely taken into protective custody and were not arrested at all."

"'Protective custody'," she couldn't help the incredulous tone that came out. Is that what he thought this was? After he had nearly choked her to death? Did he not see the bruises around her neck from his hand?

Vader ignored it. "Your personnel will forget what they saw this morning," he continued as though nothing had happened. 'I will see to that.' She paled at the thought. "You will remain here as I see to it."

Once more Padmé felt cold. She really was trapped. Perhaps she'd been in shock before, but now it was all too real. Vader was a monster, and he was going to see to his master's plan even if he had to kill everyone else in order to do it. She was trapped, and she couldn't get out.

"Very well," she replied instead, keeping her face blank, despite the turbulent feelings she had on the inside. "But only if I have your word that none of them will be harmed in any way."

The Sith was still for a moment, as though contemplating, before he finally responded. "It is curious that you believe you have any power in this arrangement."

Padmé felt ill. "Then let me beg," she pleaded instead. "Please don't hurt them."

Vader didn't reply as he left the room, closing the doors behind him as he carried out his business. The moment the doors were closed, the young senator sank back in her chair, resting her head in her hands as despair threatened to overtake her. She couldn't do this. It was all too much to bear.

Looking out the window, watching the speeders flying free across the Coruscant skies, Padmé wished that she could be as free. She wished for a moment that she didn't have to care, didn't have to worry about everyone else. For just one moment, she wished she believed the lies told by the Emperor and Vader. She wished she could just support them and their tyrannical rule so that she didn't have to fight all the time. After so long of doing what was right, even when it was nearly impossible, Padmé found that she was tired. She was tired and she just wanted to escape. She wanted freedom from everything, to perhaps just run away and walk the skies and never have to come down.

But that was not going to happen now.

## 4. Transitions

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For a week Padmé had lived under the shadow of Darth Vader. Every morning he was there outside her door, waiting. Then he would escort her to the hanger, fly her to the senate, see that she made it to her office, before storming off, usually leaving only a Storm Trooper or other guard with her. At lunch he would return, monitoring her, keeping her separated from everyone else as she ate in her office, before leaving once more when she was finished. After work he was there, waiting, and dragged her back to the base before leaving her to her own devices in her room. During that whole course of the day she barely spoke to a soul. She took meals in her room, not wanting to go into the room he'd indicated for her to use for dinner. She didn't want to risk seeing him more than she had to.

Trapped.

That was the only word to describe her life now. She was pretty much cut off from everyone and everything despite working with so many people all day. She couldn't talk to them, not really, and she was forced to carry on as though nothing was wrong.

After the first day, Padmé had been terrified that the Sith would continue to abuse her, having nightmares every night about him standing over her, while she was unable to breathe, but since then, he hadn't so much as touched her. A part of her wondered if he felt guilty about choking her, but she had quickly crushed that naïve assumption. Sith Lords did not feel guilt. The thought of touching her again probably didn't appeal much to him when there was no need. But she was thankful for it either way. The bruises that had been left around her neck were already fading into nothing, proving that he hadn't actually had to apply much force in order to choke her. He just knew exactly where and how to do it. A disturbing skill he'd acquired after many years, no doubt.

But as she sat in her office, working a week later, her com went off. Glancing at it, she groaned. She knew she should have contacted the Queen sooner, but she hadn't had the courage to ask about making the call. Vader had specifically told her that all forms of communication would be monitored from now on, even while conducting business, and if she said anything negative about what had happened to her, that he would personally see to it that she would regret it. With his reputation, she didn't doubt him.

Taking a calming breath, making sure her dress collar was up to hide the still fading bruises, Padmé answered. The image of the Queen came to life before her, and as her duty as a citizen, she bowed her head in respect. "Your highness."

Queen Jamillia sat upon her throne, staring at her with an almost completely impassive face. Almost. There was concern mingled in there that she seemed unable to banish. "Senator Amidala," she greeted. A long pause stretched out between the two women as they sized the other up. "I have heard troubling rumor about you as of late," the younger woman managed to say.

The dreaded time had finally come. She was going to have to explain what had happened, going to have to lie. Could she do this? Could she lie to the woman she'd sworn to serve? Her

term wasn't ended yet, but if this kept up, Padmé wondered if she would have to be forced into retirement. She couldn't adequately serve her planet when she was being held hostage by the Empire.

"I am sorry, your highness," she said, keeping her face carefully neutral. "I've... had much to deal with here. I should have informed you sooner."

The Queen nodded slowly. "Are you all right?"

"Of course," she lied easily. "The Emperor has seen to protecting me, personally."

The other woman was silent a moment, clearly disbelieving what she was hearing, before nodding anyway. "I see. What arrangements have been made?"

A part of Padmé prayed that the Queen would see the situation for what it was and call her home. She needed to get away from here. Maybe once safe on Naboo, she could announce that she was retiring. No one could blame her. She'd served her planet for over a decade with unswerving loyalty. It was time she had a rest. But she couldn't say that now. Not while she was being monitored so heavily.

"He has seen that, for my protection, I was moved to a more secure location, and was... kind enough to appoint Lord Vader to watch over me while they search for any more hidden rebel plots."

It sounded like a weak and total fabrication to her ears, and she wondered if it did to everyone back at home too. The Queen, however, was nodding, even as she appeared uncomfortable. "I, of course, would send for your return immediately—" Padmé sat up straighter, unable to keep the hope from her face. "—but I'm afraid I cannot. At this time." The senator slumped back down, feeling utterly defeated. "I was informed by the Emperor himself over the situation, and... and he believes it would be unwise to move you from your current location... at this time," she added again, as though it would make Padmé feel better.

Padmé felt numb. She felt... abandoned. Of course Palpatine would have already thought of every escape for her and closed them off. He wanted her to suffer, and he was doing a good job of it. So, despite wishing she could scream and cry and run away, the senator sat up straight in her chair and remained completely composed. "Of course," she nodded serenely. "It is for the best. Thank you, your highness, for understanding my lack of communication."

Jamillia seemed to want to say more, but also understood that to do so would be unwise. And so, with only a nod, she signed off, leaving Padmé to sink farther into her depression, knowing that there was no way out. Not for her.

It took a few moments to regain her composure, and after several deep breaths, she opened her eyes, ready to move forward. It was time to get back to work. The senate was convening today, and even though she wasn't scheduled to speak, she had to pay close attention. She would do her work, even if the Emperor and Vader didn't like it. In some small way, in this, they couldn't touch her here. The outrage would be too much. She still hadn't figured out how Vader kept her personnel so quiet over the incident the first day, but she supposed something like a Jedi mind-trick had accomplished the deed. But even he couldn't cover up murdering her if she said something a little controversial.

As she made her way out, she was followed by her personal secretary and Jar Jar. When they walked out of the suite, a Storm Trooper began following them, blaster in hand. He had become a known fixture here over the past week, so he only received a few curious stares. Most beings ignored him now and who he was guarding. It was just as well with Padmé.

When they entered into their pod, the senator sat down in the front with her secretary right behind while Jar Jar controlled the pod. The Storm Trooper stayed in the back, like a sentinel. He didn't get in the way, and after a few days, Padmé had learned to ignore him like everyone else. It was easy since the trooper didn't speak unless spoken to.

They were meeting to discuss how the Imperial Navy and Army were to be tried should crimes be committed on other planets. Of course the majority of the senators, who were afraid of the Empire, said it was to be left up to the military courts. A few planets, however, in which Padmé was among, believed that military men were to be tried in accordance to the laws of the planet that they had committed the crime. Those few individuals who spoke out against the Empire were, of course, branded traitors, rebel sympathizers, and the like. No one stopped to actually think about the implications that such a bill could mean. It was disheartening, to say the least.

"I don't see why this even has to be an issue," Senator Ritia Cotrilla cried, as her pod floated towards the center of the room when the debate became heated. "This is for everyone's benefit, don't you see? While I find it hard to believe that one of the good, upright Imperial Navy or Army men would even commit something similar to a crime, if they were to do it, let the military courts take care of them. It's a hassle and unwanted mess for the planet. These sorts of things are what the Imperial Courts are for. It's their jobs. I say if any person were to commit a crime while on another planet, let the Empire do its job and take care of it."

There were cheers that accompanied Cotrilla's declaration, but Padmé wasn't among them. What filth. She couldn't believe that people were stupid enough to follow the other woman. Everyone knew that the Empire did indeed commit crimes while planet-side, and even when given up to the Imperial Courts, over two-thirds of the cases were dropped and dismissed despite their severity. Even crimes such as torture were more often than not dismissed, as though it didn't happen. What was the galaxy coming to?

"Esteemed senators and fellow delegates," Bail Organa came forward. At last, we'll hear some sense! Padmé thought. "Can you not see the dangers that lie here? While I am sure that most men in the respected military forces would not take advantage of receiving no or light punishments while on other planets, we cannot deny the fact that there will be those who try."

He was met with boos and hisses, but ever poised, Bail continued. "If simply given over to the Imperial Courts, what then? They would not be standing among a true jury of their peers. They would be standing before a jury filled with biases in their favor, brothers in arms. So much favor, in fact, that if a soldier were to murder someone in cold blood, they could get away with it if they had the right friends or connections! Where would the justice be?"

"Such talk sounds like a load of rebel filth to me," Senator Cotrilla scowled, a hand on her hip. Very unprofessional.

"One does not need to be Imperial or rebel in order to see that this bill has a great many flaws," Bail replied coolly. "There are statistic reports that prove charges brought against

individuals from any given planet are easily dismissed in Imperial Courts. I have taken the liberty of gathering such evidence to display here—”

But by then, Bail was drown out by so many negative calls and yelling, that he wasn't given the chance to show the charts on the viewer. By then, however, Padmé couldn't keep quiet. She'd sat by all week while these proceedings were going on, but now she couldn't take it anymore. She'd been living in fear of Vader all week that she'd forgotten to do her job to the best of her abilities. Well, not anymore.

Signaling to Jar Jar, the Naboo pod came out into the center where Ritia was still glaring at Bail. The moment everyone realized who had come forward, they became silent. Padmé held herself with such decorum and dignity that even those who hated her still had to have respect. Cotrilla glared at her once she realized the spotlight had been stolen.

“My fellow citizens of the Galactic Empire,” Padmé began, ignoring the glares and stares a like. “This is not an issue about being Imperial or rebel or even Separatist,” she began, echoing Bail. “This is a matter of being a concerned citizen of the galaxy. Senator Organa has every right to be concerned with this bill. I am as well. This isn't about supporting our troops, it's about protecting our peoples' rights. The more power we give to Imperial founded institutions, the less power we have as private planets. As Senator Organa already correctly stated, it's not to say that we believe all soldiers are terrible people that will commit crimes and abuse the system, but there is always that chance. It's within the nature of all beings.

“I do not support the bill as it stands now,” she went on, making sure to scan the room with a steady gaze. “Revisions must be made. I would not be doing my duty as a representative of Naboo nor of the galaxy if I let this pass here today. I call for revision.”

“I second that,” Bail moved his pod beside Padmé's.

Cries of favor and disagreement were called all across the senate, and only then did Mas Amedda finally speak up and do his job. “Order!” he cried. “Order! The motion has been seconded.”

“I, too, on behalf of Malastare, agree with Senators Amidala and Organa,” Ask Aak spoke up.

Padmé had to smile slightly at the Gran. He was normally not a bold being, but he apparently had strong feelings about this. He'd just needed a little push. And soon, the Wookie senator also came to their aid. And after some more yelling and disagreements, there was no other option but to reconvene at a later date with a revised bill. Either that, or the Emperor could choose to pass it anyway. But if reports were to be believed, Palpatine couldn't do that, at least right now. The Empire was still too fragile for him to be pushing his power like this. If he wanted to keep the Empire together, he was going to have to make compromises... for now.

After the whole mess was cleared and postponed to reconvene in a week's time, they were released. Padmé couldn't help but feel pleased, happy even. She'd gotten her old spark back. It felt good. She'd been too worried about herself lately. It was time that that change and she start making real attempts at freeing herself from out underneath Vader.

“Senator Amidala!”



The young woman turned in time to see Bail Organa walking towards her. She smiled at him, even as he stared at the trooper warily. She'd almost forgotten about her guard. "Senator Organa," she greeted neutrally. "Your presentation was as organized and thorough as always. A shame we didn't get to hear the rest of it."

"Thank you. There will be another time, I'm sure," Bail nodded. "And you, Senator, were as inspirational as always."

She couldn't help the small smile. "Thank you. Are you going to lunch?"

"Soon. I need to drop off a few things from my office first." He paused. "Will you be going to the cafeteria soon?"

For just a moment, Padmé looked around, trying to see if there was a shadow following her, ready to grab her and drag her away to her office, but she didn't see him. Maybe he wouldn't come at all today. It was a fragile hope, but she hoped with all her being that he wouldn't come this afternoon. The trooper was bad enough.

"Yes," she agreed. "I am heading there now."

"Then perhaps I can join you then and we can discuss this further?" He was saying one thing, but the look he was giving her said quite another.

She nodded, getting the message. "We'll see."

They went their separate ways, and Padmé was just beginning to relax when the form of the Dark Lord appeared out of nowhere in front of her. She stopped dead in her tracks.

"An interesting speech you gave today, Senator."

Padmé struggled to keep the sorrow from her features. Of course he would be here. "Thank you," she replied tartly. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to lunch."

Jar Jar and her aid paused and hung back even as Padmé continued walking, not knowing what to do with the Sith around. And much to her distress, as she continued walking, Vader easily fell into step beside her, the trooper now no longer in sight. There was to be no peaceful lunch now. No time to talk to Bail.

The two made their way to the cafeteria, and the full room almost collectively as one stopped talking the moment the Sith entered alongside the senator. No one looked at her, too afraid of the Sith, and Padmé was forced to sit alone and eat while Vader stood guard over her. He didn't sit, didn't eat, didn't even talk. Just stood there like a big black wall. It annoyed her. Angered her. She hated him.

But since today seemed to be a special day now that Lord Vader had graced the cafeteria with his presence, Senator Cotrilla came sashaying towards the Sith and the Naboo woman. "Senator Amidala," she greeted with a false smile. 'Lord Vader,' her smile turned disgustingly sweet. "What an honor to see you here, my lord. What brings you here?"

Seeing the other woman so obviously vie for the Sith's attention instantly put Padmé off her appetite. What sort of woman would flirt with Darth Vader? Who cares if he was the heir to the throne, it was disgusting. But then, everyone knew Ritia slept her way to get to where she was today, and even slept with other senators to make under the table deals. Her morals

were all but nonexistent, so it was little wonder she would set her sights on the evil creature that would succeed Palpatine.

But to her eternal delight, it seemed Vader was about as impressed with the redhead as Padmé was herself. He took one look at the other woman before turning away in apparent revulsion. “That,” he growled, “is none of your concern.”

The look on Cotrilla’s face bespoke of fear, confusion, and insult. Although not normally one to delight in other’s suffering, Padmé couldn’t help the vicious glee that coursed through her. Finally, a man that didn’t succumb to the bitch’s charms!

“I see,” Ritia said after she recovered from her shock. This was quite possibly the first time any male and refused her attentions in many years. “Well, it is an honor all the same. It is interesting, though, that you are spending your time with Senator Amidala rather than the more loyal senators here. Why I—”

Vader turned on the woman so fast, not only Padmé, but several others about a meter away, jumped in alarm. “Leave!” the Sith hissed.

It was the fastest Padmé had ever seen the other woman respond to a command. A sense of delight filled her, and she didn’t try and stop it. As a child she’d never had a mean-streak, but she’d developed one when entering into the world of politics. Sometimes it was the only way to cope. But her enjoyment at seeing the busty redhead run away was short lived once she realized Vader had turned his attention towards her.

“Hurry up and finish,” he commanded. “I have no desire to stand here all afternoon while other mindless cretins attempt conversation.”

It was obvious he didn’t like being here. Good! She made mental note to keep coming to the cafeteria from now on. Any little annoyances she could cause him and get away with were worth the loneliness she felt at seeing everyone else enjoying themselves while they ate. It was little consolation, but it was consolation all the same.

“I’m not hurrying,” she said evenly, cutting into her meat. “Wouldn’t want to choke.” She threw him a dirty scowl.

He didn’t react to it at all. “You had better finish quickly,” he threatened darkly.

“If you’re so impatient, then leave,” she suggested irritably. “I want to enjoy my meal in peace.”

He made a strange sound that was probably due to restraining his anger or exasperation. Either way, it delighted Padmé. She knew she was playing with a caged nexu, but it was satisfying to tease him like this. It was clear that Vader didn’t want to do anything to her while in front of others, probably on Palpatine’s orders, and so she felt comfortable at the moment. She would deal with the later when it came.

It appeared as though he were going to do just that and let her alone, but after another moment, he surprised her by pulling out the seat opposite her and sitting down. All hopes for a quiet meal met a cruel death. Maybe it hadn’t been such a good idea to tease him after all.

After a few awkward moments of just sitting staring at each other, Padmé tore her attention way to gaze down at her food. She couldn’t stand just looking at that ugly mask

anymore. She already had nightmares as it was, she didn't want them to become more detailed if she should notice something new about the creature's 'face.' Vader, on the other hand, didn't seem too concerned over the situation, and continued to watch her.

"What you said today in the senate will not please the Emperor," he said at last.

"I don't really care," she spat bitterly. This hell just kept getting deeper and deeper. "What I said was the truth. If everyone else wasn't too stupid or frightened, then they would never have supported this bill as far as it has gotten."

"They are smarter than you," Vader crossed his arms over his chest. "They have learned not to attract the Empire's notice."

Padmé scowled up at him, feeling her anger rise. "So you would have mindless followers? You would have them make the decisions for everyone else in the galaxy until you both have amassed trillions of citizens that hate you?"

"Let them hate," the Sith replied evenly, 'as long as they fear.' The senator sat speechless. "As long as they fear, they obey. When they obey, there is order."

Never in her life had Padmé heard someone speak this way and mean it. It was the epitome of dictatorial brutality. She began shaking her head in disbelief. "How can you believe that?"

Vader stared at her for a long moment, before uncrossing his arms resting them on the armrests. "It is true, Senator. One only has to look at the facts. The galaxy is too big of a place to apply any other form of government. It needs strong, decisive leaders if anything is to be accomplished. Your old Republic was nothing by a joke—smoke and mirrors to appease the galaxy even as it was falling in around itself. Because there was no clear order, it could not survive."

"And you would have order brought about by fear?" she asked incredulously. "Fear will counteract—"

"Fear," Vader growled, "keeps order. No one wants to get into trouble or to be punished. Fear of the punishment keeps others in line. It is a basic principal. Even your old Republic used fear."

"That's not true!" Padmé spat in disgust. "We never terrorized planets with whole armies or threatened to wipe out a species!"

"No," Vader agreed readily. "But you did incite laws. And what are laws other than threats of punishment that will keep others out of trouble, or doing what you do not want them to do?"

Padmé fell silent. He had a point. In a twisted sort of way, he understood how law worked. The problem, however, was that he obviously had no problem about extending the ideas of law to the extreme to satisfy his own actions or those of the Empire. But perhaps she could use this to her advantage.

"True," she admitted, forcing herself to become calm. 'But with that logic, would you not have to accept what I did today in the senate as something good?' She wondered briefly if he was scowling behind his mask. "By taking away a planet's ability to punish those who have done wrong, and to hand them over to courts that would likely dismiss the cases, then you are

eliminating an element of fear which, as you pointed out, is essential for the foundation of this government.”

A few cycles of his breathing passed before the Sith found words again. “That is assuming that what you say and think about the Imperial Courts is true,” he was sounding defensive.

“You know that what I’ve said about them is correct,” she replied becoming frustrated with the hopelessness of explaining this to him. She was suddenly seized with an idea, and she reached forward, just shy of taking his hand which was resting on the table, turning pleading eyes upon him. “Please, you know I’m right. If this bill were to pass, please, make sure that the Imperial Courts take these cases seriously! I want justice in the galaxy, peace, that’s all! You have the power to see that it all ends fairly. Please, don’t ignore this!”

Again the Sith fell silent. They stared at one another from across the table, and this time, it was not Padmé who looked away first. Suddenly, Vader shot up to his full height, towering over her. A sudden chill overcame her, and she shrank back away from the creature, knowing that she had pushed too much today. She began to shiver.

“Get up,” he hissed. “You’re finished now.”

It took a moment to recompose her features, but when she did, Padmé stood and followed the Sith out, her face blank. She was slightly distressed about the fact that she hadn’t been able to clean up her mess, but someone would get it. When Darth Vader commanded you to do something in that particular tone of voice, you would have to be suicidal or just plain dumb not to obey. Anyone would forgive her for this minor offense.

The most complicated thing about being in Vader’s company was how to act around him. Thus far he ignored her more than anything, but there were rare occasions, like today, when he decided that he wanted to talk. And when he did talk, it was something fairly deep or insightful, like when he had explained to her about the Force, or their recent political debate. But what made these conversations difficult was the fact that you never knew when you had spoken out too far. One moment all was well, the next, he was infuriated. It didn’t always make sense why he became angry, but then, he didn’t really need a reason.

When they made it back to her office, she was relieved that he hadn’t touched her at all. She had been fearful he would simply drag her away as he had done in the past. But he hadn’t. Maybe she had learned to keep the proper pace so that he didn’t feel the need to touch her anymore. That was a pleasant thought.

The moment she was within the suite, and the trooper guard saluted in greeting, Vader didn’t bother to stick around. Instead he left, stalking away, cape billowing about him, leaving Padmé very confused.

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Bail Organa watched as Senator Amidala and Lord Vader exited the cafeteria with concern. He’d wanted to speak to her about everything that had been occurring recently, but the moment he’d seen the Sith, he’d known it wouldn’t be prudent to attempt conversation with his friend. Especially since last time she’d been dragged away. Something was very wrong here.

“You seem unusually pensive after scoring a point against Cotrilla.” He turned to find Mon smiling slightly at him.

“You know why I am,” he replied evenly.

“I had thought we weren’t going to broach that subject here.” It wasn’t really a question.

“It needs broaching immediately,” he scowled as he looked back over his shoulder to where his friend and the Sith had exited.

“We talked about this, Bail,” Mon sighed. “There’s nothing to be done. We have to assume that she’s lost.”

“Yes,” he agreed steadily, making sure his voice wouldn’t carry the sensitive topic to treacherous ears. “Which leads me to once again ask the question, how are we going to get her back?”

“Bail...”

“You don’t honestly believe what they’re saying?”

Mon sat up straighter, narrowing her eyes. “Bail, this is not the time nor the place,” she snapped. “She has made her bed, now she must lie in it.”

“You don’t honestly believe what they said,” the Alderaanian growled. “I know Padmé and she would never sell us out.”

“Strong words when we’ve just seen her leave with the Emperor’s Right Hand.”

“You don’t believe it either, Mon,” Bail pressed. “It doesn’t make sense. You saw what happened last week. You saw how he reacted now. If she were to betray us, then why would Vader be here to stunt her activities? Wouldn’t they want her to continue meeting us?”

“Because she’s gotten in over her head,” the Chandrilan sighed. “I’m not saying I know for sure what’s going on, but what I do know is that we must stay away. For now,” she added quietly.

“Stay away from what?”

The two rebels turned to find Cotrilla standing nearby, hip cocked to the side with crossed arms. “What are you two talking about?” she pressed.

It was hard to ruffle Mon Mothma’s feathers, but it took a lot more to do it than the woman in front of them. The Chandrilan straightened up in her seat, and stared down her nose at the other senator. “Senator Cotrilla. Have you never heard that it is impolite to eavesdrop?”

The redhead rolled her eyes. “Spare me your ‘sophisticated’ drivel.”

“I didn’t know that being polite could only be obtained by the sophisticated,” Mon drawled. “It explains a lot about you, actually.”

Bail had to hide a smile as the other woman bristled. “You think you’re so much better than me just because you were born to a wealthy family! But I say—”

“My dear, confused girl,” Mon held up a hand, unconcerned that they had gathered an audience. “I do not believe that I am better than you because I was born into a family with

means and you were not. I am not so shallow a person.' She paused. "I know I'm better than you because I didn't have to sleep with every Imperial officer on Coruscant to get to my attained position."

There were plenty of laughs, snorts, chirps, and roars of amusement that had followed, and Bail struggled not to be among them. It wouldn't look good, after all, considering he had debated this woman not too long ago.

Ritia scowled, and her bottom lip quivered dangerous. Bail was about to intervene, but the redhead stomped off before anything more could be said. Several senators clapped while Mon pretended not to notice as she continued with her meal. So much dignity for one that had just verbally assaulted another being.

Bail couldn't help but smile. "That was low, even for you."

Mon continued her meal peacefully. "Was it? I hadn't really noticed." She was smirking ever so slightly.

"Remind me never to get on your bad side," Organa laughed, shaking his head.

But as he continued on with his meal, his amusement didn't last long as he kept thinking back to his other friend. Padmé I hope that whatever got you into this mess gets you right back out soon.

## 5. Abnormal

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They weren't on speaking terms anymore. Padmé wasn't sure how she could tell, seeing as Vader rarely spoke anyway, but she could. Not one word since their discussion in the cafeteria at the senate. Not one. He'd even gone as far as to ignore her, sending troopers to guard her when it had usually been him. Maybe she was just imagining things, maybe he was just busier than normal with other things, but the Naboo woman would bet her wardrobe that he was ignoring her.

Very mature. Although she wasn't an expert on the Sith, would never claim to be, she found it more than a little strange that he was acting this way. Brooding, sure, she could see a Sith brood, it was probably in the job description. Threatening or just plain not speaking to her was understandable. But ignoring her? It seemed more than a little juvenile, and unbecoming of someone with so much power such as him. But then, he might not be ignoring her. He might just be really busy... though her feelings told her it was otherwise.

It was the weekend now, and Padmé once again found herself bored. Last weekend she'd managed to keep herself busy by doing inventory on her belongings to find out what was here and what must still be at her apartment. She'd also taken to organizing her belongings and room, setting up like she wanted. Though there wasn't much to move in the room. It was the bare minimum of everything. Just a bed, nightstands, and a desk and chair. That was it. There was a rather large holoscreen on the wall, though, which allowed her to watch the news, but she couldn't move it. She had also found a laundry chute and a com to call for her meals. Other than that, it was all rather bland, everything too efficient and lacking in any personality. She was actually surprised that there was a holoscreen at all. None of her little belongings had been brought over, no pictures to cheer the blandness of the space she inhabited here.

This weekend, though, she had nothing to occupy her time except the holoscreen. Other than the news, she wasn't one to watch much. All the shows that had passed Imperial censorship were dreadfully dull in her opinion and dripping in propaganda. There was no risqué humor or controversially explosive shows anymore. Every plot was mind-numbing and Padmé lost interest very quickly. She debated on whether to go on a walk around the base, but remembered that she would probably be questioned and sent back here if she didn't have a good reason.

Sighing, she looked about her room for something distracting. She wasn't allowed to bring any work home anymore, and calls home were forbidden. She'd already made her bed and cleaned about five times, so she couldn't do that again. It was only ten in the morning, and she thought that perhaps she should just take a nap when she remember the balcony only several doors down.

Walking out of her room, she was pleasantly surprised that 3PO didn't come rushing immediately to her side, nor did security. She knew she was being watched, but it was nice not to be able to see it. When she made it to the balcony, she felt a little better about her situation, even though she knew she was fooling herself.

Speeders as far as the eyes could see — ships and shuttles. It always amazed her how many beings could occupy such a seemingly small space. Growing up she'd learned about all the different worlds, heard about all the different planets that occupied the galaxy. But looking back on it, she'd led a rather sheltered life. She'd had her family to love and protect her from much of the universe, and she'd never felt overwhelmed, even when she'd gotten into politics. But here, on Coruscant... the first time she'd seen the planet she'd been completely stunned. There was so much to see, to do. It was a shock to every sense she possessed. How was it that so many different beings could live here like this? It was amusing, perhaps, to visit, but she didn't like living here. It was just so... different.

Not for the first time, she wondered what would happen if she decided to jump in a speeder and fly away. Her work had never really been that physically demanding, nor had her imprisonment been particularly taxing, but the mental stress... Padmé considered herself a strong person, one that was psychologically trained to withstand quite a bit. But not this. Being isolated like this, seeing everyone so near, yet having them out of reach, it would have been kinder to just lock her away. It was pathetic how she longed to be with people while she was with them and when she wasn't. She was trapped either alone or with him. Strangely, he was the only one she had been able to have any sort of normal conversations with... until he decided he wasn't speaking to her anymore.

Maybe she could jump off the balcony and try to catch ahold of a speeder? She almost laughed at the idea, imagining the Emperor and Vader's reactions when they found out. Just imagining it made it seem like a pretty good idea. Either she would be able to latch on to one speed and get away, or she'd fall to her death. Either way, she'd be out of Vader's grasp, which was all she wanted.

She was just in the middle of fantasizing leaping off, imagining what people would say and how her family would react if she died, when the unmistakable sound of a respirator filled the air. On reflex she shivered, but she remained where she was. He had said she had free reign of this hallway, and by the Force, she was going to take him up on that! She wasn't doing anything wrong either, just standing and watching the traffic go by.

Fervently she wished he would stalk on by and not notice her. But when the hissing became louder, she knew she wasn't going to get her wish. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the outline of black, but she tried not to acknowledge him as he came to stand beside her. His presence was cold, however, dark, and it filled her with dread. She wasn't sure if she could stay with him like this when she had the option to get away.

At last, she couldn't take it, and she turned to him. "What do you want?" she asked shortly.

Had she said this to anyone else, they might have called her rude. But over the past week and a half of living with him, she was slowly beginning to realize that Vader didn't like long drawn out conversations. He was a man that got straight to the point. Blunt. Padmé even suspected that he secretly preferred speaking to people when they were short with him.

"I'm leaving this evening," he replied, not bothering to look down at her. "I will return in several days."

Padmé looked back out at the city. "So. You're speaking to me again?"

It was Vader's turn to stare at her. "I was never not speaking to you."



In spite of herself, the senator couldn't help the small smile that came to her lips. Was that confusion she heard in Lord Vader's voice? And when did he use speech that sounded so... unprofessional? Had she caught him off guard that much? It was an amusing idea.

"Really?" she leaned back against the railing, both hands clutching it on either side. "Is that why you haven't been speaking to me for several days?"

"Don't flatter yourself, Senator," he growled, obviously annoyed with her flippant attitude. "I have better things to do with my time than thinking of ways to avoid you." He was pointing at her for good measure.

The senator merely raised an eyebrow, before turning away to look back out at the city. "So where are you going, dare I ask?"

"That is none of your concern," he snapped. He wasn't in the mood for this, but it was as though Padmé could sense more frustration than anger from him. She was no Jedi, but she had learned to trust her own instincts, and right now they were telling her she could push ahead, despite the growling.

So, taking a deep breath, she nodded. "Just as well," she muttered. "You're probably going out to slaughter innocent people. I don't really want to hear about that."

She thought she heard a strangled hissing sound coming from the Sith, but again, even though she was wary and slightly fearful, something told her that he wasn't going to lash out at her this time. He had come here for a reason and had given it, she only now wondered why he stayed. He wasn't the type for casual conversation.

After several minutes in which Padmé assumed he was calming himself down, he spoke up again. "While I am away, a trooper will be escorting you to and from the senate."

"Fine."

"Also, there will be troopers at the bottom of this lift should you attempt to leave the wing."

"Sure."

"Try anything while I am away and—"

"You'll make me regret it. I get it," she sighed, hanging her head in weariness. After a beat she glance over to find the Sith was staring at her and he had gone very ridged. Oh, he didn't like being treated like this? Too bad. Padmé wasn't in the mood. She'd been contemplating jumping from the balcony before he got here, him threatening her at the moment wasn't as terrifying as it would've been any other time.

He was angry, she could tell, but she tried not to let it bother her. He was still here, which meant he still had a reason to be. What it could be, she didn't know, but she was impressed that he hadn't choked her again, or thrown her off the balcony himself. There's a first time for everything.

"My personal assistant will be here should you require anything," he continued, his voice sounding more strained now than at the beginning of their little chat. Once he had divulged this information, he turned and began to walk away.

“Wait!” Padmé called. Unconsciously she reached out, and managed to brush one of his gloved hands with hers.

She gasped when he jerked away from her, as though he had been burned, spinning around to her. “What?!” he hissed.

The restraint she’d felt from him earlier had evaporated, and now she was reminded of why it was a good idea to be frightened of this creature. “Y-you said...” she trailed off, having to start again. “I-I do require something,” she replied simply.

Even though she couldn’t see his eyes, Padmé knew Vader was glaring at her. She could feel it. But once more, he must have reigned in his temper, as he simply crossed his arms. “What?”

At least he was willing to listen. That was more consideration than he gave most people. “I want to go back to my apartment,” she spoke quickly. “Not all of my stuff was brought over.”

Padmé could hear the sneer in his voice when he said, “Such concerns are wasted on useless material things, Senator.”

“All the same,” she replied, trying not to let the barb sting, “I would like it back. May I go retrieve it?”

“No,” he said shortly. “Your apartment has already been sold.”

And it was just as Padmé had feared. She wasn’t going to get out of here any time soon. “So my things were all sold?” She really shouldn’t be too surprised. She knew it was just like the Emperor to see to such matters.

“No,” Vader surprised her. “Everything has been taken to the security holding within the base.”

It wasn’t wise to get her hopes up, but Padmé couldn’t help herself. “Can I have the rest of it back then?”

Vader stared down at her for a long moment, probably mulling it over. Maybe she shouldn’t have been so flippant with him earlier. He’d been in a relatively good mood for him, why did she always push her luck? All she could do now was look up at him with big, pleading eyes. It usually worked on normal people, but she doubted it would on a Sith Lord. There was no harm in trying, right?...she hoped.

At last, he spoke. “After it has all been analyzed and if it is found to be harmless, you may have it back.”

She smiled before she could think better of it. “My handmaiden,” she began again, going in for all or nothing. “Can she come stay here with me, too?”

“No,” the Sith replied instantly.

“She won’t be any trouble, I swear.” Padmé knew she was pleading now, but she didn’t care.

“No.”

“She has a practical purpose,” she argued. “She can help me get ready faster in the mornings. And she can keep me company, give me someone to talk to while I’m here.”

“You have the protocol droid for that,” Vader began to turn away.

“I need real, human interaction,” she protested. “I... I need someone I can actually talk to. Some of us have feelings and aren’t machines like you.”

“I said, ‘no,’ Senator,” the big creature snapped. “You will cease this useless begging and get out of my sight!”

So much anger. But she couldn’t give up. Not yet. Let him choke her. She’d been so scared she hadn’t shown the proper concern for a woman that had done nothing but serve her faithfully for years.

“Please,” she began evenly after a moment, keeping her voice soft in attempt to calm him. “My handmaiden has only ever stayed with me. If my apartment was sold, she would have nowhere to go here on Coruscant. I haven’t seen her in over a week. Please. I just want to make sure she’s all right.”

“You should not concern yourself with her anymore, Senator,” Vader snapped, but did sound calmer.

Padmé paled. “What have you done to her?” she whispered hoarsely. A thousand horrible scenarios raced through her mind as to what the Sith actually meant.

Apparently he understood her fear, and had he been anyone else, the senator imaged he would have scoffed. “She’s been sent back to Naboo,” he rumbled before turning away. He had only walked a meter or so before he paused. Padmé thought he was going to say something else, but instead, a growl escaped him before he continued on. He sealed himself in the room at the end of the hall — his room, she imaged — without another glance.

He was so strange. The more Padmé watched and interacted with the Sith, the more confused she became. One thing that was for sure, however, was that she was going to have to be more careful, especially if she was ever going to find a way out of here.

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The instant he was in his private chambers, Vader tore off his helmet and mask and threw it against the wall with alarming force. He was furious and he wasn’t sure he would be able to calm himself down. How? How was it that this woman, this politician, could get him so riled up? Why did he tolerate it?

It was not to be borne. Stalking over to his hyperbaric chamber, Vader sat down with a growl, clenching and unclenching his fists. He needed something to punch, to strangle, to kill. He was so furious, random objects in the room were now floating about precariously as his powers were not being controlled properly. Had it been anything else, he could have simply exterminated the cause of his fury. But he couldn’t this time. And not just because his master had commanded him to keep Senator Amidala safe and away. No, the real reason he couldn’t destroy the cause of his fury was because he wasn’t even exactly sure why he was angry in the first place.

Senator Amidala was a bold creature, one that didn't seem to know when to shut up. She was annoyingly intelligent, frustratingly logical, and, quite frankly, a thorn in his side. She didn't even have to be speaking and she infuriated him. She could be sitting quietly, but one look at him and he was furious. When she wanted something she pushed and pushed and pushed until Vader was certain he was going to slice her in half with his 'saber.

But he couldn't do that. His master had said the senator was to be undamaged, and so undamaged as how Vader would keep her. But it wasn't just her spunk that made the Sith want to rip out her throat. Oh no, Senator Amidala was much more clever than that. It was also those sudden, earnest pleas she would send him. The way she would look up at him with innocent, big brown eyes. Vader had killed thousands of beings all across the galaxy and never had any qualms about it, even when they got down on their knees and begged. But when Senator Amidala did it...

It just didn't make sense. For reasons that went completely beyond him, when he heard and saw the senator plead it... it did something to him. It always caused him to pause, to reflect, to listen. The way she now reached out to him... He was a Dark Lord of the Sith! He should not be entertaining requests from a known traitor, and yet...

"Gah!" he cried, slamming his fists into the armrests of his chair. It was a good thing it was made of steel and leather.

But that still wasn't it. While her boldness and her begging were infuriating enough, there was also the added fact that he gave in to her requests, or at least he wanted to. When she pleaded about not wanting him to harm her friends, he hadn't done it. In fact, he'd gone out of his way to make sure that when he wiped their minds of the choking incident, he had been extra careful with them. When she had begged him to do something about the military court bill he'd wanted to help her and see justice served. He really had wanted to until sense had blessedly returned. And just now, he'd allowed her to reclaim her possessions. Why? Why had he done that? They were useless and unnecessary to sustain her life, yet he'd given them back. Why?!

Leaning back in his chair, the young Sith stared at himself in the black view screen, noticing with some pleasure that his hair had grown back. His face also looked much better, too. All the scars were fading. Except for the one over his right eye. That one was probably never going to go away.

Turning on the screen, Vader watched as countless new messages popped up. He glared at them for a moment, as though he could make them go away, before looking through them carefully. Most were nothing but junk. Some invitations to go to some gathering, Grand Moff's complaining to him about inferiors he'd killed, and even messages from lesser beings pleading for him to help them with some insignificant problems. He especially avoided the latter, being too much reminded of her at the moment.

After deleting most of the messages, he began working on answering everything that was relevant and making plans and arranging meetings, even sending a message to give the senator back her possessions. Two hours went by and his agitation hadn't lessened much. He'd tried to bury himself in work, but he was still thinking about her. It was hard not to. She was so close.

Since she'd gotten here, he hadn't been able to meditate properly. What he'd said to her over a week ago stood true. She had a strong Force signature. It was not to say that she could become a Force-manipulator, but she was significantly more aware of the Force than others. Her mind was considerably stronger than most, so mind-tricks wouldn't work on her. For whatever reason, he could sometimes hear her thoughts when she was projecting strong emotions. It was not unheard of, but it still confused Vader. He'd heard of this occurring with other Force-sensitive beings, but for a non-Force user? It was rare. There were old manuscripts that spoke of such connections, but they'd only been between two beings who were close and had a greater association to one another outside the Force.

That wasn't the case with them, though. He didn't have any sort of connection with Amidala, and he didn't want one. He marked this occurrence to his strong Force sensitivity. His master had always told him that because of his strength, he could do what other Force users could only imagine. It made sense. When he'd gone into the Jedi Temple, he'd been besieged by hundreds of Jedi, sometimes being attacked by seven or eight at a time, but he'd still come out as victor. It was not bragging when he said that he was the most powerful Force-user in the galaxy. Even when there were still Jedi about, he'd still been the most powerful. He'd found that out when he'd been curious as to his midi-chlorian count. Since finding that out, he hadn't come across any beings in history that had come close to his.

But even with all that powers, he couldn't block out the simple presence of a tiny woman. For whatever reason, he'd become so attuned to her that her presence was like a blinding light. He could be at the other end of the base, and he could still feel her. It was frustrating. The Dark Side shrank away from such light, making it nearly impossible to meditate, to surround himself in the Force. Since he hadn't been able to meditate much over the week, it left him on edge, irritate, and just plain tired.

This trip away hadn't come too soon. On his way to Bimmisaari he would make sure to meditate for several hours at a time to replenish the Dark Side. He would need it to put down the Bimm rebellion. It was essential that he was at his peak when reminding the planet just who was in control of the galaxy. It would be good to get off Coruscant and be on a mission of some importance again. It had started to get dull with no Jedi to hunt. It had been only three years, but already there were too few Jedi left. They were either all dead or in hiding.

For just a moment, Vader indulged in the image of being able to go on a bloody rampage again, as he had in the Jedi Temple. What a thrill that had been! He had never felt so free, killing all that stood in his path. It had been marvelous. No restraints. No one had been off limits.

Not like now. Now he had to behave. Now he had to play the game of politics. It was disgusting. Everything his master had said, all that he'd promised... it wasn't lining up. He'd been promised power, unlimited power. Now he had to temper himself and play the game of sit and wait. Patience was never his strong suit, but that's how this manipulation of power worked. Sit and wait; bait, and see who took a bite. Perhaps such things were required for revenge, but it was unsatisfying. His anger burned brightest fresh, and it needed release quickly or it would lessen until he simply didn't care much anymore. It was not to say he didn't hold grudges, but the majority of his anger usually fled away into annoyances. The Dark Side demanded blood, lots of blood and hatred to be fueled. But being so stunted by rules? By these games?

Yes. This stop at Bimmisaari would be good for him. It would take his mind away from the frustrations of the political and bureaucratic dealings on Coruscant so that he could immerse himself in the Dark Side. He would finally be able to do what he was best at. He would finally be able to enjoy the terror of his victims without having to worry about seeing infuriatingly bright brown eyes staring up at him and unable to destroy them.

Powerless to contain his impetuosity, Vader stood to leave, when he paused, noticing the lack of hissing. Looking about the room, he located his mask and helmet against the opposite side of his chambers. Had it not been beaten out of him, he might have sighed, but he didn't. He hated that helmet, hated it probably more than anything else in the galaxy, save the Jedi, but it was a necessary evil. Using the Force, he levitated it back over to him, before putting it back on. The infamous, chilling hiss of the respirator soon filled the silence. Lord Vader was ready.

The doors to his chambers opened and he was so focused on what last minute reports he had to receive before he left when he bumped into something. Hard. Hard enough, in fact, that it fell over, and he nearly toppled completely over as well. It was a miracle that he hadn't.

Absolutely livid, he glared down at what had been in his path, only to discover, strangely enough, an astromech. Furious, he was about to destroy it with his lightsaber, when a flash of brown and blue came running towards him. "Wait!"

Snapping his head up, he glared at the senator, who looked very pale. "What is that thing doing here?!" he thundered.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" the senator was pleading breathlessly, even as she was kneeling beside the droid, trying to help it up. "I told him not to go, but he was curious, and—"

The droid interrupted when it began making long complicated beeps and twitters, ending in a rather rude sound. It didn't help Vader's temper.

"I was not in your way!" he snapped, reaching for his lightsaber. How dare the stupid thing accuse him of not paying attention to where he was going!

"No!" the senator stood instantly, reaching out for him again. Vader pulled away, uncomfortable and frustrated with her wanting to touch him. "Please, he's just a little... eccentric. He didn't mean to be rude. Please don't hurt him."

"It's a thing," Vader snarled, again, furious he had to look into those large brown eyes.

"I know, but he's... he's my friend," she admitted.

The Sith paused. Something... struck a nerve. He could remember a time when he had been alone, with only a droid...

No! That hadn't been him. That had been completely different person. A person that was dead. They were so far gone, it was as though they never existed. Only he was keeping the memory of that boy alive.

As he stared down at the droid and the senator, Vader's first instinct was to simply destroy the machine and then perhaps remind the senator of whom she was dealing with. But that sad plea and attempt to protect something that wasn't even alive... Against his better judgment, he hooked his lightsaber back on his belt.

“Just keep that thing away from me,” he snarled. He couldn’t look at her while he said it.

Amidala appeared to be surprised, before she nodded quickly. “Of course. Thank you. A-and thank you for having my other things brought to me.”

Crossing his arms, he glared down at the droid. In spite of himself, he was finding he was more curious with the droid than angry. Rather unfortunate. “Why do you have an astromech?” While he was not necessarily politically savvy, he was fairly certain that senators didn’t need droids of this kind to pass bills.

“His memory’s been wipe!” she blurted. “Your techs saw to that.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Yes, well...” It was strange how his eyes focused on her biting her bottom lip. Was it a sign of some sort? Was she hiding something? The Force was trying to tell him something, but he sensed no lie or any form of deception. “I keep him because he saved my life a few times. He’s my friend. I just... I just like having him around.”

Sentimental over a droid. How droll. But are you any better? that treacherous part of his mind whispered. He shoved it aside ruthlessly.

“Keep it out of my way,” he said again, stabbing at finger in her direction. “If I find that it has caused any more disruptions, I will destroy it myself.”

“Of course,” she nodded.

“And you will address me with the proper respect,” he growled. He was being too lenient with her, he had to keep her afraid and cooperative. The sooner he was away on this mission, the better, he decided.

“Of course, my lord,” she amended quickly.

There was more he wanted to say, but he didn’t. Vader stared at the senator, unable to figure out why he treated her differently than other people. It couldn’t be for the sole fact that she was beautiful. He’d tortured and killed plenty of beautiful women the same as anyone else in the past. It wasn’t because she was bold either. Those who spoke out against him in the past usually just died faster than those who didn’t. But there was something about this senator. The Force was trying to tell him something. He tried to grasp ahold of its meaning, but it eluded him.

When she began shifting uncomfortably, the Sith realized he’d stayed too long. Turning towards the lift, he stalked off. The sound of the astromech’s distressed beeps sounded across the hall. When Vader entered the lift, he realized the senator was still struggling to get the heavy little machine upright.

Again, another man’s conscience sprang up in his mind. Growling at the weakness, Vader raised his hand and lifted the droid using the Force, setting it down on its own two feet. The last he saw of the senator before the doors slid shut and he was away on his mission, was the surprise shining in those bright brown eyes.

It was an expression he hoped never to see again.

## 6. Alone

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Later that night found Padmé sitting amongst the boxes of her returned possessions. She'd been delighted when several men brought them up, and amused at their nervous glances. They obviously had never been in Vader's personal wing before. She wondered if anyone ever really had. But she'd been more surprised when they'd brought R2 up as well. She'd forgotten about her little droid amongst all the chaos, but she was glad to see him safe. She would have thought, however, that they wouldn't have been so trusting of the droid. But then, Vader must have said everything, and no one ever wanted to go against an order from him.

Glancing over at the astromech, she shook her head fondly. "You're a very lucky little droid," she tasked. "I don't know what was wrong with Vader today, but you almost met the business end of his lightsaber."

The droid chirped at her boldly, and she could only imagine what the sassy little thing had said to her. She wished she could understand him better than just guessing all the time. Which actually led to another confusing revelation: Vader understood droids. It shouldn't be so surprising since half the galaxy believed that he was a droid himself, but it still confused her. Not many beings picked up on the language of machines. Vader must have spent a lot of time with them in order to master it.

Padmé scowled when she realized she was trying to piece together Vader's backstory. Vader didn't have a back story. He was just an evil thing that crawled up out of hell when Palpatine unleashed chaos in the galaxy. That was all. There was certainly nothing more to the demon.

There were boxes everywhere, all across her room. Padmé, trying to take her mind off of certain individuals, hadn't even noticed she possessed so much stuff. Where had it all come from? She certainly wasn't one to hoard, but without a full sized apartment to spread her belongings out, it certainly appeared as though she did. The men that had brought everything up had been kind enough to take back the kitchen supplies and similar objects she had absolutely no use for while here. Her furniture, she'd been informed, had sadly been sold along with the apartment. All that time and effort she'd gone through to be patient and purchase the perfect piece, all that time to match everything and wait for the proper design so she could decorate her apartment, was now wasted. At least for her. She hoped that whoever ended up in her old place appreciated what she'd done and would take care of everything. Most of the furniture was imported, after all.

"What am I going to do with all this stuff?" she glanced over at her little droid. Even though she couldn't understand specifically what he'd say back, it made her feel better to be able to talk and not feel like a crazy person.

R2 responded with several bleeps and boops that sounded particularly snarky. It made Padmé smile. "Think I should toss it all out the window?" she guessed.

The droid chirped in delighted, rocking slightly in a 'nod.' The senator laughed. Lucky guess. "Yeah, because that would go over well," she rolled her eyes playfully at the blue



droid. “Can you even imagine the wrecks tossing out one dress would cause? Never mind this stuffed animal!” She held up her old stuffed shaak. She hadn’t even known she’d brought it along to Coruscant.

Sitting back, Padmé surveyed her once clean room. What was she really going to do with all this stuff? She’d already filled up her desk and night stands with things she’d collected from around the galaxy. All of her other clothes had been put away and were hanging up. Her shoes, which she seemed to have more than she remembered, were in the closet. All of her books and pads were now just sitting in boxes beside the desk, and there were pictures that needed to be hung.

There were three options that Padmé saw. The first and easiest, she could just keep the rest in boxes and stack them as neatly as possible in one corner of the room. The second and most dangerous, she could ask Lord Vader for a shelf... or six. And the third, she could try to talk his P.A. into getting her some shelving units.

It was no contest. Option three won the day. But not now. She’d have to wait until she was certain Vader was off planet. She couldn’t remember if he’d given her a specific time he’d be leaving—probably not— but she’d already pushed his buttons enough today. She swore the man had so many mood swings it was liable to give her whiplash. There had to be a reason for his sudden violent changes in attitude, she just wished she knew what it was. What made this creature tick?

“Ugh!” Padmé stood up and flopped down on the bed, glaring up at the ceiling. Turning over, she grabbed a pad, and began writing down all she knew of the Sith. She had to figure this out.

She labeled it “Enigma” just in case someone got a hold of it. Maybe if she studied him, analyzed, she could figure him out enough to anticipate his moves. So far he’d been erratic, calm one moment, flying off into a rage the next. But there had to be a pattern. What caused these violent spikes in temperament? She doubted very much that it was because he was going through some kind of Sith puberty. She shuddered the thought. Had Darth Vader ever gone through puberty? That didn’t mesh well with the image of fully armored terror rising up out of hell very much.

But what did she know for sure? This information could potentially help others, so she might as well take this seriously. Well first, he never seemed to go anywhere without his helmet and never wore anything save the black getup he always had on. Not surprising. It was some sort of life support suit, she’d realized after a day or so. It wasn’t just for intimidation, it had a function. Whatever the reason, he needed a respirator to breathe, though the reason for this and his species remained inconclusive at this time. That was all she could think about when it came to him physically. She didn’t think she needed to mention his height. Everyone knew that. But what else?

He knew Galactic Standard and the droid binary. Sitting back, Padmé puzzled over this a moment. Only people who spent an outrageous amount of time with droids picked up on their binary, and only then did an individual actually understand them and not just a sense of what they said. Vader had been specific when he’d been yelling at R2. He’d understood exactly what R2 had said and had basically repeated it back to the droid to make his point. Vader was fluent, one might say.

It made sense if one prescribed to the theory that the creature was a droid himself, but Padmé didn't buy it. There was something organic in that armor, of that she was certain. And if he had organic parts, he must have been alive once— whether or not he was truly alive now was debatable and completely up to one's point of view. But if he had been truly alive once, he must have spent a lot of time with droids. Binary wasn't something someone picked up after listening for a while and taking classes. It was far too complex for that. Usually only people who grew up working on them could understand them as well as Vader apparently did. Which meant that as a younger whatever-he-was, he must have worked on droids?

It was a theory, at any rate. But if this strange concept of Vader actually having 'younger years' was true, that meant that he had to have worked somewhere where there were a lot of droids. The first place that came instantly to Padmé's mind was a spaceport. Or, it could have been some sort of mechanic shop. Either would make sense seeing as the creature owned an outrageous number of ships in his hanger. He liked machines, which would explain his understanding of binary. But if he had worked somewhere else as a child and wasn't always the two meter terror he was today, then that meant that he must know other languages as well. No one that would work at a space port or mechanic shop or the like could get away very well with not knowing more.

So, so far all she had was that he wore all black, was tall, had to have some sort of organic parts to him, and was multilingual. But surely that's not all there was to him! There had to be more. In terms of temperament he was, of course, unstable. He obviously did not like being questioned, and begging only made things worse... but it hadn't for her, had it? She'd begged him for her stuff back and he'd given it to her. She'd begged him not to hurt R2 and he hadn't. Threatened, but not hurt. But thus far she hadn't heard or seen him do something like this. Maybe it was an isolated event? After all, he was preparing to go off planet, maybe he hadn't wanted to argue?

Padmé almost snorted at the idea. If there was one safe bet when it came to Vader, it was probably that he would argue with you no matter what. If he truly hadn't wanted to argue he'd have killed her or destroyed R2 before she could protest. No, today was an isolated event, though she didn't know what caused it. It couldn't be that he was in a good mood. She'd actually put him in a rather foul one before she'd asked for anything, so why had he been... generous?

If she tried to think about this more, she'd probably explode from pure frustration, so she might as well leave this as an extraordinary event that was never going to happen again. So what else did that leave? Well, there was the fact that he was impatient. To an extreme. He didn't like waiting and he didn't seem to like sitting still for long periods of time. The longest she'd ever seen him sit was when he was flying her to work.

And that was another thing. His flying! Force! She'd never seen or ridden with anyone so utterly reckless before in her life! Somehow he managed to do things in a speeder that Padmé honestly hadn't known speeders were capable of. And half the time it didn't even seem like he was paying attention! It only solidified her belief that at some point in time Vader must have worked extensively with machines. He could very easily have been a racer the way he pushed the limits and attacked obstacles. Had she not had to ride with him while he was doing it, she might have been more impressed with this talent of his. But as it was, it scared her senseless.

He also didn't like to talk very often, only when he had to. She could count on one hand the number of times they'd had conversations with one another that was longer than him telling her hurry up and her replying with an 'okay' or 'I'm coming.' Today was one of the rare occasions he spoke to her longer than thirty seconds. It was apparently a waste of time to communicate when not strictly necessary.

There was also the fact that he was a loner. Padmé could remember seeing events on the holo or even attending a few herself when Vader had supposedly been present, and not once had she seen him mingle. She'd always been told that he stayed around the edges of parties, technically in attendance, but not in the thick of it. It made her wonder if he was shy, awkward, or if he truly and deeply hated people so much that he could barely tolerate them and only came to events because it was required. It was probably the latter. But it begged the question, did he ever feel anything else? Could he feel awkward around others? Could he feel shy or uncomfortable? This was all assuming, however, that he had feelings. But still...

Padmé sat up, eyes wide. "What are you doing?" she growled at herself. Was she trying to make Vader more... human?

There were so many things wrong with that. First, he might not be human. Second, if she was trying to think of a back story or about his emotions, she was trying to attach herself to him. That could not happen. This creature was the one that nearly strangled the life out of her, for Force sake! He was rude, cruel, and just plain evil. This was the Slayer of Worlds! The Emperor's Hand! There were so many stories of him slaughtering innocents that there were no misunderstandings to be had. Darth Vader was evil.

But thinking this way went against everything that she'd been taught as a child. Her parents had told her that there was more to a person than what was presented at the surface. There was more to a person than what appeared in the now. Her father had once said that peoples' pasts shaped them into who they became, and one wrong step, one tragedy, could destroy a person until they were unrecognizable from whom they had been before. She'd seen it before when she'd helped at refugee camps and friends after they came back from war. Pity was the only way to combat a person if they changed for the worst, and while it didn't excuse their behavior, you could always show compassion towards them for all that had wronged them.

So far, Padmé had always held this as a truth. She'd always tried to be compassionate and considerate towards others who had undergone great misfortunes, even if it was hard sometimes. Sometimes people became so bitter it was just plain hard, but you still had to try.

But it was different with Vader! She couldn't be compassionate or have pity for such a creature! It was impossible and it was wrong. There was so much blood on Vader's hands that one could flood worlds with it all. There were so many planets that were still recovering from one visit from the Sith. After only appearing in the galaxy for three years, he had already done more damage than the entire Separatist Army! He was a single creature, but one of such immense power that it was truly unfair that such a being existed with that much authority. To see Darth Vader was to see death.

Even know all this, even hating the creature so very much, Padmé still found herself curious about him. What had happened to him to make him like this? What had he gone

through in his life to lead him to this moment? What sort of being willingly became a twisted shell of a creature? Surely he could not really be happy?

“GAH!” This wasn’t helping! She plopped down on the bed completely exasperated.

R2 made a concerned sound, drawing Padmé’s attention. She smiled weakly at the droid. “I think I’m going insane, Artoo.” She pushed her hair out of her face. “Tell me, if you knew someone was evil, would you even bother to try and understand them?”

The droid rolled back, as if shocked and disgusted with the idea, probably knowing what she meant, and made a flurry of beeps, none of them sounding encouraging, but strangely cynical. It made her giggle. “Yeah, you’re probably right,” she flopped back down, looking at the ceiling. “They don’t really deserve it.”

But even as she said it, curiosity still burned brightly inside her, and she couldn’t help but doubt herself. She didn’t have to like him, it was pretty well an eternal fact, but for whatever reason, she wanted to know more. She wanted to know how Darth Vader came into existence.

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The quest for seeking answers to Darth Vader’s past was soon deemed an impossible mission — at least without gathering anymore more data on the subject. So, to occupy her time, Padmé went about finishing sorting her room. By the time sixteen-hundred hours rolled around, she thought perhaps she could chance venturing out into the open again. From the slight warmth in the air, the senator knew for a fact that the Sith wasn’t near, as everything would be bitterly cold and dark feeling.

Walking towards the lift, she paused by the balcony, wondering how her earlier conversation with Vader had managed to get her back all her stuff. Surely there was no knowing Darth Vader. Perhaps he was just too much of a mystery to even try to puzzle together. That wouldn’t stop her, though.

Once the lift had taken her down to the office floors, she was immediately stopped by a Storm Trooper that was stationed by the lift door. “Halt!”

Padmé stopped, working to keep the irritation from her face. “I need to speak with Lord Vader’s personal assistant.”

The trooper didn’t seem to like that. “For what purpose?”

“Listen,” she snapped, posting her hands on her hips. “Lord Vader said that if I required anything, his personal assistant would be available. Now, are you trying to defy his orders by not taking me to his P.A?”

That did the trick. The trooper signaled at his partner before gesturing for Padmé to follow. Apparently you could get a lot done around here by throwing out Vader’s name. She would have to remember that. They twisted through the halls until finally they came outside the typical sterile door with a neat label on the outside that read “Lieutenant Pilor.”

The trooper stepped forward and banged on the door. It was surprising that there were not dents in it now. After a moment, however, the door opened and the young man she had seen several times before talking to Vader stood in the door way, and annoyed, disdainful expression on his face. “Do you have to beat down my door?” he asked drily.

The trooper ignored him and instead jerked his head towards Padmé. “Senator wants to speak with you.”

The lieutenant blinked in surprise before turning to stare at her. Straightening up, as though trying to be intimidating—but failing considering Padmé had spent more than a week in the general company of Darth Vader—the young man nodded and stepped aside while gesturing for her to enter. “I’ll escort her to the lift when we’re done.”

The trooper nodded before marching off. When he was out of sight, the lieutenant closed the door, and turned to regard Padmé. She studied him as well, keeping her expression cool and professional. Oddly enough, after a moment, the young man began to squirm just a bit, and she realized that she was intimidating him. She wondered how that was possible since he spent more time with Vader than she did.

But he was nothing if not professional and gestured for her to take a seat opposite his desk. “What can I do for you, Senator?”

Sitting down as gracefully as possible, the young woman regarded the lieutenant. He was about her age, perhaps a year or so younger, and had black hair and interesting green eyes. His skin was olive, and despite him trying to cover it, she detected a slight accent. He wasn’t from Coruscant, that was clear, and it made her wonder where he was from.

“I understand that Lord Vader is off world now, correct?” she began as casually as possible.

Apparently that wasn’t very wise because the young man immediately narrowed his eyes. “Why do you want to know, your highness?”

Of course it sounded suspicious, and Padmé could have laughed at his face at the moment. But she would take pity on the poor man. She could image what kind of threats Vader had given to him if she should do anything. She couldn’t honestly let this boy get into trouble or a possible deadly situation just so she could tease him.

“I’ll be honest with you,” she said forwardly. “I need shelving units.”

He blinked in surprise. “Oh.” He paused. “Well, I suppose that’s not unreasonable. What kind of shelving units?”

Padmé could have cried in joy. This was the first friendly Imperial that she’d met thus far since coming to the base. Usually, when she’d seen him every other time, he was busily speaking to Vader, trying to get work done, and she hadn’t really gotten a feel for his personality. Now, however, she could see herself getting to know and like this man.

“I need shelving for pads as well as other random assortments of things,” she explained. “Nothing fancy... though I suppose that won’t be a problem here.” She glanced around the bland room.

It surprised her when she heard an obvious and unprofessional snort escape the young officer. When she stared at him, his eyes widened before he flushed. He apparently hadn’t meant to do that out loud. But when Padmé threw him a small, knowing smile, he relaxed slightly. “Ah, yes. Well,” he cleared his throat awkwardly. “S-so how many shelving units will you need?”

“Well, I would say five or so.” The lieutenant stared at her incredulously, before writing down her request anyway. When he was finished, he presumably began searching for shelves on the database. As she watched him work, she was suddenly overcome with a yearning for conversation that didn’t involve yelling or becoming terrified for her life.

“So,” she began. “What did you say your name was?”

The young man looked up, like a mynock caught in the headlights, before he regained his composure and began working again. “Sorry, your highness. I’m Lieutenant Arlo Pilor.” He gave her a small smile.

“Senator Amidala,” she introduced herself formally. “And there’s no need to call me ‘your highness.’ I’m not Queen of Naboo anymore.”

“But it’s proper protocol and shows respect to you for having served your planet,” Pilor began, looking confused. He was apparently a by-the-book kind of man.

Padmé smiled warmly at him. Sure he was an Imperial, but he was the first person in the whole base besides Vader who talked to her for more than a few grunts, like the troopers. And despite never actually talking to him before, she’d always seen him give her pitying glances when she was forced to and from Vader’s wing. While she hated being pitied, she was sure the man’s heart was in the right place. Besides, he had personality and she was in desperate need of some human interaction that wasn’t work related.

“Just call me Amidala,” she smiled, holding out a hand for him to shake.

The lieutenant seemed horrified, before tentatively taking her hand in his. “Arlo. Or Pilor. Whichever you prefer, your... Amidala.”

The senator couldn’t hide her amusement. “Thank you for your help. I really appreciate it. You know,” she leaned back slightly in her chair. She knew she was stalling going back to her room, but she needed to stall. She couldn’t take just sitting there staring at a wall anymore. “—you’re the first one on this base that’s acknowledged my existence besides the causal glance.”

Arlo looked a little guilty. “Yes, well. Lord Vader wouldn’t exactly be pleased if everyone came rushing over to you and wanted to sit down for a chat... By the way, is this all you needed? I’m not sure I’m supposed to be sitting around chatting with you, myself.”

Padmé tried to hide her disappointment. “Yes, that was all,” her smile slipped from her lips. “I wouldn’t want to get you into trouble with Lord Vader.”

To his credit, Pilor appeared torn. It was clear he didn’t like distressing her, but it was clearer that he didn’t want to incur Vader’s wrath. It was sad to think that the creature inspired such terror in his inferiors that even when he was off planet, they dared not bend any rules.

“Sorry,” he mumbled as he stood. “Why don’t I escort you back to the lift? If you need anything else, I’ll try and get it for you.”

“If it’s within Vader’s realm of ‘reasonable’?” she stopped herself short from rolling her eyes. Arlo didn’t dare answer. “Very well. Thank you for your help, again. You’ve been most kind.”

The young man smiled as they left his office. "It's my pleasure, Senator. Again, if there's anything I can do, please don't be shy to ask me. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you," she smiled again.

When she made it to the lift, Pilon paused and held up a hand briefly as a way of goodbye. "Goodnight, Senator Amidala."

"Good night, Lieutenant Pilon."

And when the lift doors shut, Padmé once again felt the weight of loneliness overcome her. The first truly friendly conversation in a while and it had been in the shadow of fear of Vader. What was it about Vader that inspired such fear? Padmé herself was terrified of the creature, but why? Was it really just the way he looked? How he sounded? His strange powers? The combination of all of these?

No, it wasn't these things. She had met Jedi before who had similar powers or height. And there were plenty of males with lower voices. What was really so terrifying about the Sith was the fact that he didn't hold back. If someone made a mistake, he didn't just yell, he killed. He used his tremendous powers with no restraint. There was no moral line with him.

Stepping out of the lift, Padmé found herself drawn back to the balcony. Here she was, trapped with a creature that radiated evil, her whole life had been turned upside down, but the world was still turning. Life went on even though it felt like hers was over. Interesting how insignificant one life was to the outside world.

Sighing, she leaned forward on the rail, watching the speeders go by. Once more she wondered what it would be like to just jump off the balcony and into a waiting speeder. What would it be like to just run away, rushing through the skies at neck-breaking speeds? It would be the ultimate freedom, to defy the law, to defy gravity, to defy expectations.

...Was that why Vader did it? The thought entered her head before she could have stopped it. But the more she thought about it, the more plausible it could be. Even though she had been terrified at the time, Vader had essentially done what she'd dreamed about doing the whole time she'd been held in captivity. As she recalled those horrifying stunts he'd pulled, she'd realized that it was exactly what most people fantasized about doing. No traffic law concerned him, no speed was too fast, no height was too high. He did what he wanted and soared through the skies.

As strange as it sounded, maybe there were times Vader looked off this balcony, dreaming the same thing she was now. Maybe flying was his escape. The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. Vader was so busy all the time, she was pretty sure he didn't rest much. He had to go to meetings all the time, had to make plans, had to put down rebellion, had to hunt down enemies, and had to answer to the Emperor's beck and call. He was even stifled by his life support suit. He was trapped in responsibility and physical limitation. Maybe flying was his escape, his freedom. Maybe...

"What are you doing?!" she hissed, backing away from the balcony. Why was she doing this to herself? Why was she trying to make him into something that was worthy of life? There was no life in him! He was cold and empty!

Force, what if this was what the Emperor had wanted? Was she letting down her guard already? Had she been so long without proper socializing that she was desperate enough to try to humanize Darth Vader? When he got back, would she be so far gone that she wanted to actually talk to the Sith? What was wrong with her?

Stalking back to her room, Padmé flopped down on her bed, burying her face under her pillow. R2 made an inquiring sound, but she didn't bother to respond. Her mind was too busy berating herself over her own stupidity. Was there some way for her to un-think her thoughts? Some way she could stop herself from being curious? It wasn't the first time she'd wished to stop feeling like this, but it was certainly the most desperate she'd ever felt this way.

"Artoo," she rolled over, pulling the pillow off her face. "If I do anything crazy, please electrocute me."

R2 beeped in an unsettling fast, positive manner. She was about to ask why he so readily agreed when a surprised exclamation sounded. "Oh, dear!"

Startled, Padmé sat up, looking around wildly. "Threepio!" she gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, forgive me, my lady," the protocol droid said, looking as flustered as a droid possibly could. "I heard this astrodroid in here and was curious."

Looking between the two, she nodded slowly. She'd actually forgotten about 3PO with all the excitement today. "Of course. See-Threepio, this is Artoo-Detoo. Artoo, Threepio."

"Oh yes, we've become acquainted, my lady," 3PO exclaimed happily. "He has some very interesting stories programmed into his memory banks."

The astromech gave several protesting beeps, that Padmé expected was R2 defending himself, claiming they were true. It was amusing, especially as 3PO appeared taken back. "Oh! Oh dear! Surely you couldn't have been through all that!"

R2 responded in a way that Padmé could almost hear as being, 'Damn straight I have!' It made her smile. She just hoped that R2 wouldn't tell any stories to anyone else, lest they realize that his memory hadn't been quite as erased as they'd thought, or discover his backup memory.

But worrying aside, she was thankful to have R2 back with her, and 3PO as well. They were her only companions now and maybe, just maybe they would occupy her mind enough so that she didn't have to try and humanize monsters.



## 7. Return

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By the time Vader was en route back to Coruscant, he was in a particular mood. When he'd first left the capital the Sith had immediately gone to his room to meditate. After several hours, he'd immersed feeling energized. His senses had been sharpened and he felt more powerful than he had in weeks. By the time they'd arrived at Bimmisaari, the Bimm rebellion hadn't stood a chance. It had been almost too easy to make them pay for their disobedience. Now they would never forget that the Empire was the rightful authority in the galaxy.

When the Star Destroyer docked at the port just over Coruscant, Vader was already in his shuttle flying towards the planet. The crew had been terrorized enough with his presence the last five days, he felt confident that they wouldn't fall back into their laziness from before he'd walked on board. He'd only had to kill one officer this trip. Truly the navy was starting to get the message about how he liked ships to be run. Not for the first time the young Sith wondered what some of the officers would think if they knew he was younger than all of them and had such power. Imagining their expressions was delightful.

But by the time he came into the atmosphere, he contemplated what he should do next. He was in a mood to get things done, and done quickly. He hadn't felt this motivated in a while and wanted to take full advantage. But he also knew that the Emperor would be expecting a report soon. Perhaps it would be prudent to go to his master directly before focusing on other business. Yes, that would be for the best. If he buried himself too deeply into anything, he could potentially forget about his master completely. That would not go over well.

So, with that in mind, he headed for the Royal Palace. It seemed he was expected when he landed. There were several Royal Guards waiting for him as he stepped out of the shuttle, and without a word, led him towards the throne room. Their pace, however, annoyed the Sith. They were too slow for his liking, but they would not let him pass. It was all about presentation here, and it was nothing but a waste of time. But a waste of time that had to be suffered due to his master's tastes.

When he entered, his master was sitting upon his throne, speaking with Grand Moff Turfon. The moment the Sith Master saw his apprentice, he held up a hand towards the Moff, silencing him. Vader bowed as he came to the foot of the throne. "Master," he greeted respectfully.

Sidious smiled in malicious pleasure. "Rise, my friend. Rise!" he greeted. 'Leave us,' he told the Moff, who looked put off by being so easily dismissed. But he said nothing, apparently not wanting to incur the wrath of either Sith Lord. When he was out of the room, the elder Sith turned back to his apprentice. "What news do you bring for me, Lord Vader?"

"The Bimm uprisings have been crushed, my Master," he replied. "I captured the leaders and publicly executed them myself."

Sidious laughed. "Good! Good. What of the people?"

“Troopers have been left to ensure that peace remains. There will be no chance of rebellion of this scale to occur again.”

The Emperor was grinning. “Excellent, Lord Vader. I sense you have become strong.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Your hate is strong.”

“Yes, Master.”

Sidious leaned back on his throne. “Soon, my young friend, you will be strong enough to heal yourself, to be free of the suffering you have endured at the hands of the Jedi.”

Vader sneered, but made sure his mental shields were up so that his master would not sense anything amiss. If only the old fool knew –It was good he didn’t. “Yes, Master.”

The Emperor sat for a moment, regarding him, before his smile turned absolutely wicked. “So tell me, Lord Vader. How is your guest?”

The younger man paused. “Guest, Master?”

Amusement fled the old man’s features so quickly that Vader feared he would be punished. “Lord Vader,” he said in an alarmingly calm voice. “You haven’t let anything happen to Senator Amidala, have you?”

Senator Amidala! He’d forgotten all about her for the last several days.

“It would be unfortunate if she were dead,” his master continued with a hard edge to his voice.

Feel much better about the situation, Vader nodded at his master. “She was alive when I left.”

That was enough for his master, it seemed, as the older Sith relaxed ever so slightly. “Good. See to it that she stays that way.”

After a pause, Vader couldn’t contain his curiosity over the matter, and decided to risk speaking up. “As you wish, Master,” he began respectfully. “But I am curious as to her importance. She is a traitor to the Empire. Why keep her alive?”

Apparently his master wasn’t willing to let him in on the secret yet, as he asked instead, “Have you found any other traitors amongst the senate?”

“Suspects only,” Vader replied crisply. “There is no hard evidence, but I am certain of several. Am I to detain them?”

“No,” Sidious looked disinterested. “Let them be for now. When the time comes we will expose them and use them to serve as warning to any who dares defy us.”

Within the helmet, Vader scowled. “Why not arrest them now, Master? Why risk the chance that they might cause chaos? I could kill them all.”

“You could,” the Emperor said coldly, ‘because you are too short sighted and dimwitted to see all the possibilities.’ Vader tensed at the insults. “I have foreseen their usefulness. That is all you need know,” he snapped. “Now. Leave. See to Amidala.”

A growl of frustration wormed its way up his throat, but Vader repressed it. Not back an hour and already he had to restrain himself. What he wouldn't give to be back out among the stars, flying, away from the capital and from his master. To be free...

But that was not his life. Bowing low, Vader rumbled a "Yes, Master," and dismissed himself.

It was a long, infuriated walk to the hanger bay, and the more he thought about his conversation with his master, the angrier he became. The flight back to the base took far too long for his liking, and yet it was far too short. It was strange, however, that he hadn't thought about Senator Amidala the entire time he'd been away, yet suddenly, now he couldn't help wonder how she'd be reacting to his piloting at this moment. No doubt she'd be curled up in her seat, squirming and gasping every time she thought he got too close to something. Which was ridiculous. He was in complete control at all times. She obviously had not heard that he was the best pilot in the galaxy. Perhaps he should inform her the next time she tried criticizing him.

When he returned to base, he stalked out of the shuttle, not bothering to wait around for the welcoming committee to realize he was here and make hurried speeches about how glad they were he was back. Lies, all of it. It was a waste of time and resources, but then, his master was all about the pomp. He might be the Heir to the Empire, but that didn't mean he liked living like the rest of the spoiled nobility he had seen in the past.

It was fortunate that everyone stayed out of his way for the most part. His P.A. approached with a pad in hand, which listed all the updates and reports that he might not have gotten while out on his mission. He took it from the lieutenant without a word and continued on to his chambers. Meditation was in order, but first, he had to make sure the Senator was indeed still alive. He mentally snorted when he recalled his master's accusation. What was he? The senator's keeper? In a way, he supposed he was, but the idea disturbed him. He didn't want to own anyone.

When he made it to his wing, he could sense that she was near. Her presence was a beacon. He'd forgotten how bright it was, how pure. He hated it. It was part of the reason why he hadn't been able to meditate properly before. If only he'd been able to execute her. Life would be going so much smoother.

Not bothering to sound the com, Vader opened the door. Immediately he wished he hadn't. His lack of patience would be the end of him, as he master always accused. Perhaps this was a reminder of why he should practice more patience.

The senator was sitting on the edge of her bed in nothing but a thin robe that covered her body completely... except for the long leg that slipped out between the opening, exposing her appendage nearly completely up to her hip. The moment she saw him she jumped, quickly covered herself as much as she could. It came as a relief, although Vader wasn't sure why.

"Lord Vader!" the woman gasped as she stood, looking flustered. "Wh-when did you get back? Why didn't you com?!" she was nearly in hysterics.

But the Sith wasn't sure what to say. He shouldn't have to explain himself to this woman. He shouldn't have to make up excuses. So, instead, he stared at her, making sure that she appeared well, before he turned and left. There was no point in talking to her. As he now

recalled, before he'd left, she hadn't wanted to know anything about this mission, and it had ended up been too bloody and controversial anyway. She was well and healthy, and that was all he'd wanted to know. If he'd wanted to actually speak to her, he would stay. But he didn't want to talk. Especially at the moment.

He turned and left, glad to hear the sound of the doors hissing closed behind him. For whatever reason, he suddenly got the bad feeling that all of his hard work in immersing himself into the Dark Side of the Force had all been for not now that he was back on Coruscant. First, his master wished for him to limit himself, to repress his anger and powers, and now he was back to sharing a living space with a woman who exuded light and... well... other things.

When he entered his room, he marched straight over to his hyperbaric chamber and sat down. Carefully, he took off his helmet and mask, taking a deep breath to calm himself. Just returned from a mission and already he was yearning to be back out in space. If only his master would allow him to live on a ship. But that wouldn't look good for the Emperor's Heir. Vader had to be here on Coruscant, despite wanting to be anywhere else.

Eyeing his dark room, Vader was suddenly seized by the sudden sensation of being trapped. It wasn't the first time he'd felt this way, but it was the first time he'd felt it so strong since he was first incased in this suit over three years ago. He didn't understand it, this feeling. Not really. Sure, he was limited by his work and master to go wherever he wanted, and he couldn't be without his suit for a little while longer yet, but there was something different about now as opposed to when he had felt like this in the past. Now there was an added element, and he couldn't figure out what it was.

Glancing back over at the blank screen, it was obvious that he wasn't going to get much done. Not now. He'd been so ready before his meeting with the Emperor, but now all Vader wanted to do was find something to do that he didn't have to think too extensively about. There was only one option.

Shoving his helmet back on, the Sith stormed out of his chambers and made his way to the hanger bay. No one stopped him, no one offered a 'welcome back' since last time he'd strangled a man for saying it. He hated insincerity from his personnel. He knew very well they liked it better when he was gone. The thought, strangely, didn't please him at the moment. It only seemed to exacerbate the feelings of imprisonment.

An hour later found him working on one of the prototype shuttles that engineering had sent his way. These shuttles were hopefully to be equipped on all Star Destroyer models, for transferring goods or troopers. It was a fairly solid design, with only a few bugs that still needed to be worked out. He would have to test fly it after he was finished working at some point. The more he thought about it, the more he wondered if he should see if he couldn't modify the wings so that they were more fuel efficient.

As he worked on the undercarriage, still pondering over design modifications, he found himself groping for the hydrospanner. He reached out, searching, when it was suddenly placed in his hand. Startled, he pulled himself out from underneath, and stared at the blue dome of an astromech.

The two gazed at one another, the droid appearing as nervous as a droid could, before it asked if that was the tool he was looking for. Vader ignored the question. "How did you get

out of my wing?” he growled.

The droid answered with evasive explanations and excuses that didn’t quite make any sense. He had never encountered a droid that spoke around the answer to a direct question. Droids were made to obey and work, it was rare to find one with so much... personality. ‘Eccentric,’ as the senator had called it, didn’t quite do this little one justice, Vader could already tell.

After another pause, the Sith shook his head. “I doubt Threepio told you to find me,” he answered at last.

If a droid were capable of it, he knew that this little one would have been shuffling his feet. But eventually, it responded with something equivalent of, ‘Yeah, well, you know...’

Eccentric indeed.

Giving the droid a final once over, Vader turned back to his work now that he had the hydrosponder. The droid stayed as well, oddly enough. And after working in silence, it surprised the Sith by apologizing for the other day. Unable to work when having such a bizarre conversation, Vader sat up again.

“Did the senator put you up to this?” he frowned.

The droid shook and spun his dome in the negative, quickly explaining that it had felt badly for being so rude to him the other day. It was strange to hear a droid sincerely apologize for its behavior. Stranger still that Vader could hear the sincerity. Droids weren’t supposed to have real emotions.

A part of Vader couldn’t help but reach out to the droid. He’d always liked droids, especially ones with character. Droids were better than people as far as he was concerned, and they were more easily fixed. He could fix droids. He couldn’t fix people.

So after making the little machine wait apprehensively, the Sith turned back to his work. “What is your designation number?”

More beeps. “Artoo-Detoo,” he nodded to himself. “Very well. You may stay. But be warned, if you are in my way, or I find you plugged into anything you should not be, I will not hesitate to destroy you. Do we have an understanding?”

R2 made a shocked, but hurried reply, and it caused the Sith’s lip to twitch in amusement. “Good. Now, if you’re going to be a bother, at least be useful about it. You may hand me what I require.”

Several hours passed in surprisingly companionable occupation. The R2 unit was actually quite capable of handling the tasks Vader assigned to it, and was actually very astute. A few times it had even stopped the Dark Lord from making minor mistakes. They were nothing he wouldn’t have seen after a moment or so, but it did save some of his precious time. The droid also didn’t badger him with questions or chatter like 3PO had a tendency to do. Instead, there were moments when the droid would make snarky comments about a technician at the other end of the hanger that he’d been watching, giving Vader an excuse to terrify people, which was always enjoyable. Over all, it was a rather relaxing—dare he say it— fun time. Not once in all that time did he have to think about big brown eyes or long legs.

When there was nothing else to be done, the time was nearing three in the morning. He escorted R2 back to his personal wing in silence. When they made it to the hall, he paused near the balcony and turned to the droid. It turned its sensory 'eye' up at him. "If I find you wandering around again, I will be forced to wipe your memory. If you continue to do it, I will deactivate you until you are needed. Am I understood?"

R2 whistled an acceptance before beeping out a question. It made Vader pause, weighing his options. On the one hand, it would be a great help, but then again, he hadn't been at the top of his game since the senator had come to stay with him. Having her here brought out a side of him that he wanted to keep long buried, and this droid wasn't making that any better. But still...

"If I require your assistance, I will come gather you, and you may help me," he agreed. Only a small part of him was overjoyed with the idea, the large half was angry, screaming at him that this was a very bad idea.

But he'd already said he'd do it. Vader wasn't known to back out of his promises. At least very often. So he walked the droid to the senator's room and opened the door. As R2 rolled in, Vader paused and stared into the dark room. His visor within the helmet easily adjusted to the darkness, and he could make out the sleeping woman in bed. Her Force presence blinded him, yet he found himself staring all the same. What was it about her? Why did she stir so many unwanted emotions within him?

The Force swirled around as he thought of her. It was whispering something to him, something that should have been obvious, but he couldn't hear. She was important, he understood that. Maybe the Emperor was right in keeping her alive. Maybe she really did have some sort of part to play that would see to righting the galaxy and making it the way it should be.

He just hoped he wouldn't regret letting her live.

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Vader's mission to Bimmisaari had been all over the news several days later after he returned. Padmé watched reports in her office, scowling. Of course the news stations bespoke of the glorious victory of the Empire, of how it saved the planet from traitorous, dangerous rebels that would have surely destroyed it, before the brave Lord Vader came rushing to the rescue at the order of the wise Emperor Palpatine. It was all disgustingly cliché and wrong, and she could barely stomach to watch it. But she had to. She wanted to see if she could piece together the truth.

Of course there was always the option of just asking Vader for his take on events. No doubt he would tell her exactly what happened, but a part of her didn't want to hear the absolute truth. The gruesome details were not something she liked to dwell on. But then, she doubted the Sith would tell her anyway. He had become very withdrawn again, hardly speaking to her. It didn't seem as though he were avoiding her exactly, but there was something going on with him.

Padmé hit her head on her desk, groaning. There she went, trying to come up with emotional motivations for Vader. Why was she doing this to herself? He was no better than a machine. Cold, lifeless, and dangerous. If she shot him, would he even bleed?

But she couldn't help it. For the first few days since his return, being around the Sith had been suffocating. It was like the evil cloud that had always surrounded him had doubled. But now it seemed to be fading back to 'normal' levels. She refused to believe that she could just be getting used to being around him. She didn't like to think that she was being desensitized to evil. But she could tell that he was calming down.

And she still couldn't believe that he'd walked into her room without signaling! True, she hadn't been indecent or anything, just her leg peeking out from the robe a bit, but nothing risqué. She'd been so embarrassed at the time, one would have thought he'd seen her naked! But after a while, as she thought about it, his reaction to the event was definitely puzzling. He'd just stood there, not saying a word. He'd stared for one, two, three minutes before he finally shut the door. What had he been looking for? Had he been somehow scanning her room? Maybe he'd been looking at all of the added shelves she'd gotten? Or maybe... Had he been staring at her?

That was crazy. Vader didn't look at women unless he was going to slice them in half. Not once in the three years that the Sith had made his public debut had he gone anywhere near women. He didn't subscribe to the typical rich and powerful male. People in general were targets for contempt, and it didn't matter if they were male or female. Vader just hated people too much to get close to anyone. And Padmé had a feeling that relationships of any kind just weren't his thing. Relationships required a give and take, and an opening oneself up to show weaknesses to any other. That definitely did not sound like anything Vader would be into.

So what was with him? What made the creature tick? He was so unlike anyone she'd ever met it was physically exhausting to try and untangle the mysteries surrounding him. If you expected a normal being to react one way, Vader was the complete opposite of the opposite you thought. Just when you thought you understood a small part of him, he was suddenly reacting in ways that could never have been predicted.

For instance, before he'd left for the whole Bimmisaari excursion, he had been seething about R2. He hated him so much that he'd literally been right about to tear the little droid apart. He'd even had his lightsaber out and ready! But right before he left, he'd helped her pick up R2, and then just yesterday, R2 sounded like he was whistling a greeting towards the Dark Lord. But what was more, Vader actually nodded back. When had they become friendly? It made no sense.

But then, Vader's reaction to droids was considerably different than with other sentient beings. He liked them. Or it seemed as though he did since he kept a protocol droid like 3PO around. How anyone with such a short, violent temper could stand 3PO's worrying and bumbling about was a whole mystery unto itself.

In short, there was no 'figuring out' Lord Vader. It was like asking a being to condense the universe to fit into a single can of fruit. It wasn't going to happen. It was impossible. There was no consistency with Vader. He did what he wanted, reacted how he wanted. Maybe that's one of the aspects about him that made him so terrifying. One didn't know what to expect from him, so everyone had to be on their toes at all times. Coupled with his inconsistent mood, his disregard for life, and his strange powers, it was clear now why everyone feared him so. There was no reasoning with him, no begging. If Vader wanted you dead, he would kill you.

But he hadn't killed her.

Padmé groaned at the thought. It was probably just because the Emperor wanted her alive. Everyone knew that when it came to subtly and diplomacy, Vader was about as useful as a charging Reek. His approach to politics was straight forward and completely brutal. Needless to say, the Emperor took care of a lot of the politics, so it was probably the Emperor who realized that killing her at the moment would only be counterproductive in securing his position and getting the Empire to fall into further submission. But even if it was ordered not to kill her, it didn't mean Vader wouldn't lose his temper and kill her in a fit of rage.

Yet he hadn't. There had been plenty of opportunity for him to snap, but he hadn't. She'd teased him, made him angry, begged, did many things that he was known to hate, and yet he had stayed his hand. Except for the first day when he'd choked her, he hadn't so much as touched her again. In fact, the few times she'd gotten carried away and reached out for him he'd shrank back so fast one would've thought she was poison. He didn't like touching unless she was the one to initiate it, it seemed. Yet another interesting little factoid about the Sith she'd picked up.

It was all too confusing. It was better not to think of Vader at all, yet that's all she found herself able to do. She was so isolated now, nothing took her mind off of him. She practically lived with him for Force sake! It's not like she could readily just forget he existed. He was always there, even when he wasn't. His presence was felt everywhere. That cold, dreadful feeling that shrouded him in darkness. It lingered in the air long after he'd gone, and now she was becoming used to it.

Indeed, the cold didn't bother her quite as much, and the darkness, although oppressive and suffocating, was beginning to lose its potency. Even more disturbingly, however, was the fact that she was becoming used to being alone. She talked about politics at work, worked with a few other senators about bills, and slowly, very slowly, that was becoming enough. Slowly she was becoming acclimated into Lord Vader's way of life. Work and then isolation. She even found herself wanting to cry less and less over her situation.

How could anyone live this way? Live this way but have the choice to improve it and not taking it? To say that Vader was antisocial would be the understatement of the century. It was like saying Coruscant was busy. For whatever reason — reasons that Padmé simply couldn't fathom — he liked being alone. She, too, on occasion liked to get away and have her personal time, but this? This was extreme. What had happened to Vader that made him this way? Had he had bad experiences with people when he was younger? Perhaps he'd been awkward as a child? Or maybe, more disturbingly, maybe he had suffered enough to make him hate humanity in general...

And there she went again! Vader doesn't have a past! And stop victimizing him! she scolded herself sternly. It was becoming harder and harder for her not to try to psychoanalyze him. It was not uncommon for her to chant in her head about how many beings he'd killed or tortured, and any other negative fact she could think of. But it was becoming hopeless. She was becoming obsessive and she couldn't stop. Vader wasn't like other beings. She wasn't even sure he even was some sort of creature at all. No, he was nothing. Nothing except pure evil, created by the Emperor.



Standing up, Padmé walked out into the suite, unable to be alone in her office anymore. She was about to ask her assistant what else she had scheduled today, when Senator Cotrilla barged in. Wonderful, she thought. I have that to deal with.

Walking forward in greeting, Padmé put on a false smile. “Senator Cotrilla,” she extended her hand, but the other woman refused to shake it. “How nice of you to join me.”

The redhead gave her a superior look, before stalking into Padmé’s office uninvited. It was infuriating, but the Naboo senator kept her poise, even when Jar Jar made a face which clearly expressed his opinion of the other human. When she was certain no one else was looking, Padmé winked at the Gungan with a small smile, before turning back to the business at hand.

When she entered her office, she found Ritia sitting down in one of her more comfortable chairs near the window, glaring at her, as though she’d done something wrong. Calmly, Padmé closed the door and went to sit across from the redhead. “So, Senator, tell me what brings you here today?”

“Cut the poodoo, Amidala,” Cotrilla snapped. “I want to know what’s going on between you and the Imperial Navy.”

Padmé frowned, but was unable to keep her contempt of the other woman out of her expression. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Amidala, even if you’re good at it. It’s been weeks now, and we’ve seen more of Lord Vader here than we have since the creation of the Empire. Not to mention you don’t go anywhere without a trooper. So what’s going on?” she demanded.

While Padmé prided herself of being a tolerant person, she had to admit she had little patience with this woman. “Everyone was sent a report about the rebel attempt to get rid of me,” she gave the other woman a cool expression. “It was all in the report.”

“But that was weeks ago,” Ritia pushed. “And since when did you ever gain the Emperor’s favoritism?”

“I’ve always been his favorite,” Padmé used the Emperor’s own taunt to taunt the woman before her. It was somewhat ironic.

Cotrilla, however, didn’t seem impressed. In fact, her face became a red as her hair. “That’s a load of shit, and you know it! You’ve only ever spoke out against the Empire! Why on Coruscant would he suddenly want to protect you from rebels? Everyone agrees that we’d be able to get a lot more done if you just died,” she spat. “What good are you?”

“She is of very great importance,” a chillingly deep voice said from the doorway followed by the all too familiar ominous hissing of a respirator.

Both women jumped in surprised, turning to stare at the Dark Lord. How in the seven layers of Sith hell had he been able to sneak up on them? Vader was probably one of the loudest beings she’d ever encountered, yet he’d been able to open the door and listen to them without them even knowing. Was this some sort of Force power or had they really been arguing that heatedly?

“L-Lord Vader!” Cotrilla shot to her feet, nervously pushing her hair behind her ears.

Padmé stood much more gracefully. “Lord Vader,” she greeted calmly. “Forgive me, but I’m in the middle of a meeting with Senator Cotrilla.”

“Your meeting with this woman is finished,” the Sith replied haughtily. “Come with me.”

Although she didn’t like being bossed around, Padmé had to admit she was relieved that the Sith had come. Strange, she would rather be with him than Ritia. Would wonders ever cease?

“Please excuse me, Senator,” Padmé smiled with faux-regret. “But I must see to this. Perhaps we can discuss this at a later date?”

Cotrilla looked between her and Vader and then back again before she shook her head. “N-no. That won’t be necessary. Good day. Good day, Lord Vader.”

The Sith didn’t even acknowledge her as he waited impatiently for Padmé. The brunette woman didn’t bother to see the other out, and instead was forced to walk out with Vader. They had just gotten out into the hallway, when Padmé turned to look up at the creature in black. “Where are we going?”

“To the cafeteria.”

She frowned. “It’s not noon. And you hate the cafeteria.”

“Would you rather have continued sitting there talking to that woman?”

Was that a threat? Padmé looked away, not entirely successful at keeping her lips from upturning slightly. “An early lunch it is.”

Would wonders ever cease?

## 8. Confusion

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He had to stop this. It was becoming too much of a habit with him lately. Habits were things to be broken. Habits were potentially dangerous. They meant becoming complacent. Sith Lords could not afford the luxury. Luxury in general was not something a Sith apprentice could get away with, anyway.

Sitting in his hyperbaric chamber, Vader was contemplating the very great mystery that was Senator Amidala. What was it about her that drove him into fits of frustrated anger? What was it about her that made him want to choke the life out of her? What was it about her that always made him listen more intently when she spoke or make him pause when she made a point? What was she that could cause the great Lord Darth Vader to think about her more than he thought about anyone else save the Emperor himself?

This was dangerous, he knew, but he couldn't stop himself. Against all training, against better judgment, he was curious, and his curiosity had to be fulfilled. Who was Senator Amidala? The question burned in his mind, and he would find out.

It didn't take long for him to find her information records. With his security clearance, he had access to every private file she had. Her medical records, her dental, her schooling, anything that he wanted to know about her. But he wasn't interested if she had ever had her tonsils taken out, so he skipped that sort of information, and went straight to her basic history.

Padmé Naberrie. Amidala was her regal name. Interesting. He'd always known that Amidala wasn't her birth name, but at the same time, he'd never really stopped to wonder what her real name even was. Padmé. He'd never heard a name like it before. Padmé.

She was born twenty-five years ago, in the spring in the lake country. There was a picture of the little mountain village near the lake. It was... beautiful. Vader wasn't sure he'd been to a planet that looked so completely serene before. It begged the question of if everywhere on the planet was as beautiful as where the senator grew up. It didn't seem likely that a whole planet could look like this. But then there were worlds that were consistent across. One planet instantly came to mind, covered in so much coarse sand and merciless heat...

But Naboo was much different than that planet. It all seemed to be a green, lush sort of place. Reading on, he was beginning to understand why she fought so hard to protect it eleven years ago from the Separatists. It was impressive, actually, how young she had been when elected Queen of Naboo. It seemed like a terrible idea to him to have one so young in charge of an entire planet. But then, Amidala had done a rather good job, or at least everyone else thought so. She'd nearly ruined his master's plans, but in the end, it worked out better for all involved. She had protected her planet against all odds, and Vader found he had to respect her for that. Vader also had to admit that when he stepped forward into power, he hadn't been much older.

After her astonishing rise to power at such a tender age, and after the war, Amidala had gone on to be one of the most powerful and influential queens that Naboo had ever had. She managed to get more done than any past royal in the last century. She was then elected to

serve in the senate one year before the Empire was official created. And in that time of being in the senate, she'd been a powerhouse, speaking out against Imperial dominance and against the Clone War, while still maintaining respect throughout the galaxy.

Now she resided here, in his care, and despite her precarious position, she still managed to stir up controversy and trouble. Nothing could go smoothly with Senator Amidala around. Frustratingly enough, people listened to her. Even Vader had to admit she was strangely compelling when she was passionate.

Sitting back, the young Sith looked through her considerable list of accomplishments. When she was young, she helped out the poor and refugees, was elected as Queen of Naboo at fourteen, navigated a successful war, created better relations with the native Gungan peoples, passed reforms, opened better welfare programs, created new jobs, and the list went on. She was a doer, something that Vader could appreciate, but she was unfortunately misguided. Her belief in democracy was naïve and foolish. It was dangerous.

He was scrolling through her political agenda when he stopped, something catching his eye. It was a holo. An old picture by the looks of it, but still clear and recognizable. Underneath it read, Official Nabberrie Family Portrait.

It was her! It was Amidala, only as a child. And she had a family. A real family. She had a mother and a father and a sister, even. It took a moment for Vader to determine which girl was in fact the senator, but only a moment. She was the younger, meaning she had an older sister. For some reason, he couldn't tear his eyes off of the portrait. Of the family.

An uncharacteristic ache filled Vader's chest as he continued to study the picture. It had been a long time since he'd thought about families, and it infuriated him now to be thinking of it again. He had forgotten what it felt like to yearn for such a thing, but now he was remembering all too clearly. It wasn't worth it, and he tried to forget about it, but couldn't. The way they all looked, so happy and carefree, so peaceful.

It wasn't fair! Why had the senator been blessed with so much? Why had she been born into a family of means on a beautiful homeworld, with obviously loving parents and a sibling, a good education, and plenty of opportunities? Why did she get such a perfect life when so many other beings in the galaxy didn't? What made her so special that she was fortunate like this? Why had her life been perfect while his had been...

But none of that mattered now. Her perfect life had gotten her into trouble with the Empire, and despite having scratch and claw his way to the top, he had made it. She was tumbling down. People like Amidala were born lucky, but luck always ran out. Vader, on the other hand, had worked and suffered to achieve all that he had. He made his luck, he didn't have to rely on anyone else. In the end, he was stronger and held the power. Who cared if the senator had a family? Had love? It was all a waste of time. Family only ever abandoned you.

This was wrong. He knew that from the beginning, and now he suffered the consequences. He closed down the files he'd pulled and sat staring at the blank screen, trying to rebury the past. The past wouldn't help him. Men like Vader had only the future to look forward to. For men like Vader, the past could be potentially crippling.

Unfortunately for him, the future contained Senator Amidala. He couldn't get away from her, and he couldn't stop thinking about her. She was always there, in the back of his mind.

Everything about the woman bespoke of her privileged upbringing in the way she moved, spoke, and carried herself. In many ways she was demanding and expectant, even of Vader, a quality he despised. He'd had to deal with such beings before in the past and hated them. But now he was the one with power, and those old tormentors were probably still living in poverty on that horrid dust ball in the Outer Rim.

And there he was, thinking of that place again. He had to stop this. It was damaging. How could he properly maintain his anger and hatred when he was too busy thinking of the past and of her. Of those damn brown eyes haunted him, sparking in anger, fear, hate, pleading. But there was also a kindness to those eyes, a softness. It reminded him far too much of another set of brown eyes he had not seen in many, many years...

"Stop!" he cried, grabbing the side of his head in agonizing misery. Why was this happening to him? Why did all of these infernal memories come now? It had been over a decade since he'd last thought of them. Why now? Why did they seem connected to the senator?

He needed to get out of this room. He needed to get out of this life. Unfortunately, he had to stay around Coruscant on his master's orders. But he couldn't stand to be in this dark room anymore. He felt suffocated. He needed to release this built up anger.

Shoving his helmet back onto his head, Vader stalked out of the room and went to the training area to practice his sparing. Hopeful he could smash and destroy these memories away.

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A week later, it was quiet. Too quiet for Padmé's liking. When she came to work she liked there to be noise because when she went back to the base and forced into her room, it was far too silent. The vote over how troopers should be tried was this afternoon, but despite the controversy, there wasn't a lot of chatter around the building. Did everyone else know something she didn't?

She was walking from Senator Wittiom's office after discussing the proposition of a trade agreement, when she thought she heard noise. It was none of her business really, and she had to get back to her office so she could finally be rid of the Storm Trooper trailing her, but she was finding she was too curious to resist. It had been so quiet around the senate. Maybe she could find out what was going on.

Although she wasn't sure why, something told her she should be discreet. She didn't like disturbing the stillness; it was like some unspoken rule. It was lucky for her that she didn't have to tell the trooper to be quiet, as he was always silent anyway. Just a quick look to see what it was, maybe inquire as to what was going on, before she went back to her office to get ready for the senate to convene. She turned to look at the trooper, but he was following with an almost indifferent manner.

When she turned the corner, Padmé could now make out distinct grunting noises. And they were coming from the 'fresher. It didn't sound pleasant whatever it was, but curiosity would always be her downfall. Maybe someone was hurt and had fallen in there and now couldn't get up? It wouldn't be the first time it'd happened. Some of the senators were quite old. Turning to the trooper, she nodded towards the door. "I'll be right back."

Thankfully the trooper didn't bother to argue this time, and simply posted himself outside. Satisfied that he wasn't going to insist on making sure she didn't do anything traitorous while in the 'fresher, Padmé walked in. It only took a moment to discover the source of the noise. What she saw was definitely not what she had been thinking.

"Force!" she exclaimed in absolute disgust.

Two surprised gasps sounded about that time, and hurriedly, one naval captain jumped about a meter away from Ritia Cotrilla all the while trying to pull up his trousers. Ritia, who had been sitting on the counter of the sink, was hastily pulling down her skirt. Padmé couldn't quite avert her eyes and continued to stare at them both in revolution.

The captain was beat red, and once he was done adjusting his pants, all but ran from the 'fresher, only giving a slight nod as he left. Seeing him leave helped pull Padmé from her shock, and she rushed out of the 'fresher as well. The trooper guard was still standing out there, watching as the captain ran, before he turned to look back at his charge. Padmé was about to leave, when the 'fresher door opened again, this time revealing a disheveled Ritia. "Wait, Amidala," she began, but trailed off when she noticed the trooper.

The moment the trooper saw the redhead, however, he did something that Padmé had never heard from a trooper, something she hadn't even thought they were capable of. He burst out laughing. Not a chuckle, not a giggle, a full out belly laugh. The kind that hurt after a while, but you kept laughing anyway. Had Padmé not been so horrified, she might have joined in laughing simply because it was oddly infectious.

Ritia turned bright red, her mouth opening and closing, before she stormed off, looking suspiciously close to tears. Padmé almost went after her, but stopped. She wasn't friends with that woman, and her comfort wouldn't go over very well. Instead, she turned her attention back to the hysterical trooper, who was now doubled over he was laughing so hard. After about another full minute or so, he straightened up, still giggling, before he jerked a thumb over his shoulder and asked, "Was that Oquier?"

It was the first time he had ever volunteered to speak, but all Padmé could do was nod, not really knowing the captain's name. The trooper began chuckling again, actually rubbing his hands together in vicious glee. "I can't wait to tell the boys! What was that bink's name?"

"Senator Cotrilla?"

The trooper laughed again. "This day just got a lot less boring."

Shaking her head, trying to get the images of what she'd seen in the 'fresher out of her head, Padmé began a hasty retreat back to her office with a strangely happy Storm Trooper. She had never heard one laugh before, and it all felt too surreal. Turning to the clone, she regarded him for a moment. "What did you say your name was?"

"CT-585," he responded instantly, becoming much more professional again.

"Right... but do you have a name?"

"No," he replied bluntly, but then apparently thought better of it. "Never got enough combat experience to get a nickname."

He sounded almost sad. Padmé had often wondered how the clones felt, having so many others exactly like you running around. “Well, you’ve certainly served plenty here at the senate. I’m surprised you haven’t gone insane from boredom yet.”

“It’s not so bad,” the trooper actually shrugged, continuing to surprise the senator with his conversation. “I once had to stand guard over the Imperial Treasury. That was boring. No one even walked by except to change guards.”

Padmé nodded. “I can imagine. Have you been in many battles?”

“A few. Mostly at Corellia to put down the rebellions at the beginning. Now that had been a real job,” he sighed wistfully. Padmé found herself feeling sorry for the trooper, even if she didn’t agree with what he fought for. It wasn’t his fault, anyway. He’d been bred to believe what he did.

“Then why don’t I just call you Cory?” she suggested. “It sort of shows where you were last stationed in action, and it even begins with your first serial letter.”

The trooper actually stopped walking, and Padmé could almost see the smile break across the clone’s helmeted face. “Cory,” he said slowly. “Yeah. I like the sound of that! Cory.”

“Well, good!” Padmé smiled back. By this time they’d made it outside the office suite. “I need to gather a few things before going to the senate. I’ll be right out, Cory.”

“Very good, Senator,” the trooper nodded, before posting himself by the door. He was now back into his professional mode, but Padmé found herself not caring. She’d actually managed to have a conversation with a Storm Trooper! She’d even helped him with a nickname. Maybe she really could survive all this.

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Several hours later, after the senate was released, Padmé managed to convince Cory to let her go to the cafeteria to get something to drink. Really, she wanted to go on a walk to clear her head, but she needed a better reason than that. It hadn’t been very pretty in there. The issue with the courts was becoming hotter and hotter, and no one had really come to any decisions about what to do. But all that business aside, it was amazing what being nice to a Storm Trooper could accomplish. After just one talk, she had somehow gained a little more freedom to leave her office without a real business related item.

She had just gotten into the cafeteria and paid for a Chandrilan tea, when a flash of red caught her attention. When she turned, she saw Cotrilla stalking towards her, looking much more put together than the last time she’d seen her. When the other woman got to her, the brunette nodded. “Senator,” she greeted neutrally.

“You have no right to judge me!” Ritia hissed. “What you saw was private and none of your business!”

“Of course,” Padmé agreed, blowing on her tea. “I didn’t want it to be any of my business. But I would suggest that the next time you desire an intimate moment, you don’t have it in a public ‘fresher.”

The redhead flushed. “You think you’re so much better than me, don’t you, Amidala?” Cotrilla was all but foaming at the mouth by now. “Well, you’re not! Some of us don’t have

wealthy parents to mooch off of and use to get ahead in life.”

“Right,” the younger woman stopped herself short of rolling her eyes. “And some of us don’t whore ourselves out to get ahead in life and actually work.”

Ritia was visibly shaking with rage. “You don’t understand the real world, Amidala! Not everyone could be born into the perfect little family like you. Not everyone had the assets you had. Some of us have to use whatever we have at our disposal.”

“Even if it means degrading yourself?” Padmé spat in disgust. “Have you no self-respect? Have you no shame?”

Cotrilla glared down her nose at the other woman, which only made Padmé’s blood boil. “You obviously have been living in a fantasy your whole life,” she spat. “In the real world, you don’t get something for nothing, and you have to be willing to give anything.”

“I’ll keep my self-respect, thank you.” This time she did roll her eyes.

“You have no room to judge me, Amidala!” Ritia cried again. “Say what you will, but at least I’m not under guard all the time. I bet you’re nothing but a rebel traitor yourself!”

“Obviously. That’s why I’m still alive,” Padmé responded drily.

When Ritia looked like she was ready to start clawing her eyes out, Cory stepped forward, blaster in hand and trained on the other woman. “I’m going to have to ask you to step away from Senator Amidala,” he commanded plainly, not an ounce of respect or sympathy in his voice. He was once again just a trooper doing his job.

The other senator stared at the trooper incredulously. “Who do you think you are to be ordering me around?”

Cory powered up his weapon, pointing it at her chest now. “I’m the one with the blaster,” he growled. “Now stand down, ma’am.”

Now it was Cotrilla’s turn to be nervous. “You can’t do anything to me, I’m a senator!” she cried. “What would your superiors say?”

“I would say ‘Good work’.”

All three turned in time to see Lord Vader stalking into the cafeteria. Padmé found herself instantly pleased before she could stop herself. When she realized what she was thinking and feeling, she crushed the feeling immediately. But still, the last time Vader had been around when Ritia had wanted to begin a confrontation with her, the Sith had saved her. Interesting how he always came right in the nick of time, like some sort of Black Knight. A disturbing image, but not completely inaccurate in this case.

Once more, while in the presence of the Dark Lord, Ritia began messing with her hair, trying to make herself more presentable. Better keep working, Padmé thought as she recalled the other woman’s activities today. It had been quite the exercise, after all.

“Lord Vader,” Cotrilla breathed. “What brings you here, my lord?”

“The feeling that my charge was being threaten,” he replied darkly. “What’s going on here?”



Padmé wasn't sure if he was being completely serious or not. But before she could speak, or Ritia for that matter, Cory stepped forward. "Sir, this woman was harassing Senator Amidala."

Cotrilla paled. "I-I wasn't... I mean, I was just—"

"Why were you harassing Senator Amidala?" Vader demanded, suddenly becoming more threatening. A curious reaction.

"I-I—I—"

"Answer me!"

"She was just embarrassed about something I saw earlier and she didn't want me to say anything," Padmé explained quickly as she noticed the Sith raising a hand in a familiar strangling gesture. She might hate Cotrilla, but that didn't mean she wanted the other woman dead.

"What did you see?" he demanded, now turning on her.

Padmé shared a glance with the other woman who was deathly pale. When she didn't answer soon enough, the Sith took a dangerous step towards Padmé, and for one horrifying moment, she thought he was going to grab her neck again. Instead of her neck, however, he grabbed her by her upper arm, dragging her forward. "What did you see?"

The small woman gasped in surprise and pain, but she couldn't focus on that too long. This was the first time she had ever been so close to the mask. Not even when he'd choked her had she been so close. It went against her theory that he didn't like being near to anyone. Now she was just a short span away from his face. Despite her terror, she found herself trying to see through his mask, trying to see if she could make out actual eyes. She found herself searching for anything human in him.

But when she didn't respond, and Vader's grip began to relax ever so slightly, Cory spoke up. "She walked in on Senator Cotrilla fucking Captain Oquier in the female 'fresher, Sir."

At the word 'fucking,' Vader was released from the spell he'd fallen into, and turned to stare at the trooper while simultaneously releasing his victim. "What?" It was the first time Padmé had heard such obvious shock in his voice. And was that an almost embarrassed inflection she detected?

"I-I can explain!" Ritia stepped forward. "It's not what she thought — what you think! I certainly wasn't... wasn't making love to the captain—"

"Not what it sounded like to me, lady," Cory snorted. "Sounded like you and the Cap were swapping DNA."

Ritia was blushing, and so was Padmé. She never knew that clones could be so shameless. But then, they were soldiers, and soldiers tended to speak more crudely than most. They were also especially blunt individuals. Maybe that's why Vader liked them. There were so many holopics of Vader with the troops while there were so few of him with anyone else.

When Ritia didn't respond right away and was left gaping at the trooper for his lack of finesse, Vader straighten up to his full height. "I see," he rumbled, sounding thoughtful.

‘Trooper,’ he went on. “See Senator Cotrilla back to her office. Then find Captain Oquier. I would like a word with him.”

Cory saluted. “Yes, Sir!”

As the trooper corralled Ritia away, her protests could be heard down the hall, but the trooper was nothing if not efficient and he was able to easily get her out of the room. Padmé watched with an uncomfortable feeling coming over her. Turning back, she found herself alone with the Sith. She shivered. The air around them was different than any other time she’d been with him. It was still cold, still dark, but there was a strange, static sensation that permeated the air, filling the room, swirled with anger on the outside. It made her feel increasingly uneasy.

“Listen, it’s no big deal,” she began, fighting not to ring her hands together. She had the horrible feeling that someone would die because of this little stunt. “Everyone knew that Senator Cotrilla was... that she has quite the... amorous personality. We all knew she liked to get friendly with officers. It’s not like—”

“You all knew but turned a blind eye towards it?” Vader hissed, taking a step forward. “Is this how the Emperor’s senate is run? Through bribes and sex trades?”

“What? No!” Padmé began shaking her head, but the Sith was only becoming more agitated.

“This is a disgrace!” he growled. “And you defend democracy! How could the galaxy be run by such people that would sell themselves just to line their pockets with more credits? People who don’t really care about the galaxy at all?”

“Cotrilla isn’t the normal senator,” Padmé snapped, unable to help herself. “She only got the position because of sleeping with your officers! She would have never have gotten this far if she hadn’t curried the favor of your men!”

“And you are telling me that this sort of thing didn’t happen before?” He stabbed a finger out at her. “That all senators before the Empire were virtuous people who never took bribes or slept their way into position?”

“No,” she admitted bitterly. She couldn’t lie, even to him. “But it hasn’t gotten any better since the formation of the Empire.”

He seemed to be struggling with something, something that Padmé didn’t even understand. Why was he getting so angry about this? Surely he must have run into similar corruption within the Imperial Navy? In the palace, even! Unless, somehow, such scandals were kept from Vader’s ears for fear that he would destroy everyone involved? Maybe this was just the result of his frustration and hatred of the senate finally building up enough into something tangible he could grasp and he would make the most of it to release his anger?

After another moment of just standing listening to his breathing, the Sith eyed her. “And what of you?” he asked slowly. “What sort of deals have you made to get into your current position?”

The world stopped turning for one eternal instant. The two stared at one another before slowly Padmé’s face became steadily redder. Whether it was from embarrassment or anger was anyone’s guess. Had he just insinuated—?

“How dare you!” she whispered hoarsely, eyes narrowing into slits. “H-how dare you accuse me of something so foul! I have never made such corrupt deals in my life! I’ve worked hard to get where I am today — I’ve worked hard to get into politics on my own!”

Vader stood with his arms crossed over his chest in an antagonizing manner. Did he not believe her? Or was he just trying to make her angry? It was working, in any case. She was angry, furious even. No one had ever dared accuse her of such a thing. Padmé had always worked hard to avoid such scandalous accusations. She had worked so hard to avoid it that she had very few romantic encounters to speak of as a result. Her love life was probably as barren and void as the Jedi. But to hear someone accuse her...

“I’ve never slept with anyone!” she snapped, furious with his silence. “How dare you even suggest such a thing! My career has only ever been based off of my own work. I never used anyone to get ahead like that!”

His continued silence still frustrated and irritated her, but slowly, the Sith uncrossed his arms. Eventually, the air went back to just being the regular cold darkness that she had come to associate with him. He was still angry, but probably only because one of his officers was caught in a scandal, one that Cory hadn’t made sound any better than what it was. Why had this upset him so badly?

Again, Padmé found herself searching his mask, trying to pick up any trace of humanity. There had to be something under that mask. What was it? For whatever reason, she itched to know. She almost ached. Surely there had to be more to this creature than this. There had to be life in some form or other.

But she never got a chance to speak. Instead, Vader gestured for her to go, and the senator had to oblige. They walked in silence all the way back to her office. For the first time in a while, Vader entered with her, and when in her office, he sat down near the window while she went to her desk. Without Cory to guard her, he was apparently going to do it himself. It was a little disturbing, to have him so close after their small fight, but she couldn’t exactly tell him to get out.

He pulled out a pad from one of his belt pouches and began working even as she did. They worked in silence in a strange sort of companionship. Padmé wasn’t sure if this was some sort of progress or not. One could never tell when it came to the Sith. But what was for sure was that things were going to get a lot more awkward between them, especially since she blew up at him in the cafeteria. Force, she’d even admitted she was a virgin. She couldn’t stand the thought of him being amused by that.

By the time the end of the day rolled around, Vader all but dragged her out and pushed her into the speeder. It was a strangely careful push. And after the silent ride back to the base, Padmé found herself sitting alone in her room, feeling oddly confused. What was going on?

She was just thinking about turning on the news when R2 came rolling up to her, beeping excitedly.

## 9. Discoveries

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Padmé stared at the little droid in front of her in confusion. He was beeping quite frantically. She frowned at R2 wondering what he was so excited about. She was about to call 3PO, when the astromech rolled over and began bumping into the bed until her pad fell off.

Scowling over at him, she bent over to pick it up, when R2 began beeping wildly. After a moment, her eyes lit up. “Oh! Can I plug this into you?”

The droid beeped in a positive manner, so Padmé held up the pad and R2 plugged in. After a moment, R2 beeped again. On the screen, a question popped up: “Is it working?”

“It works!” the senator grinned. “I never knew that you had some sort of drive to do this.”

R2 seemed to hesitate a moment before admitting, “I tricked a technician into putting in the proper outlet.”

The senator’s eyes widened in disbelief. “How did you manage to do that?” she hissed.

The droid beeped out a long complicating story, which translated into essentially tricking 3PO into letting the astromech tag along for chores, and then basically making 3PO ask for the modifications. It made Padmé thankful that the droid wasn’t a sentient being. Who knows what sort of terror he could inflict upon everyone else? In fact, it made her wonder if he and Vader could have been some sort of friends... if Vader even had friends.

“But be sure to look like you’re working,” R2 went on before Padmé could reply. “The droid monitoring the cams is programmed to pick up any suspicious activities as well as trigger words. Pretend you’re reading.”

Well, this was certainly new. Taking orders from a droid. But then, Padmé didn’t exactly have much choice. R2, the sneaking little devil, had somehow managed to find ways around the Vader imprisonment barriers. It shouldn’t have surprised her since she suspected the Dark Lord might even like the astromech, although he’d never say it. But still, it was impressive that R2 could get away with this when in a military base.

“Okay,” Padmé lowered her voice, nodded as though reading something on the pad, trying to hide the connection it shared with R2. “So what are the trigger words?” she mumbled just loud enough for the droid to hear.

R2 brought up a list of obviously suspicious words. Much of it had to do with anything political, anything related to current events, or related to the military or navy. Padmé almost snorted when she saw that Vader had put his own name and the Emperors. They were quite obvious, so she was glad she hadn’t been thinking out loud recently. There were even planet names that were off limits and guarded. Most of them made sense, though a few were suspicious. Like what was on Despayre, Rinn, or Geonosis? And what the hell could be on Tatooine? She could hardly even remember where that planet even was, let alone what could be important about it.

But this was all very useful information if shifted through carefully. Some of these topics could very well be guarded projects that the Empire was afraid might be in rebel hands. Vader had told her bluntly that he knew she was involved with the rebels, so it made sense that he could be panicked if she spoke of such subjects. This was all very good information the rebels would like to look into.

“How did you come by this?” she muttered.

“Threepio got me access to the main computer terminal in Lord Vader’s chambers.”

Brown eyes went wide and Padmé had to force herself from showing too much surprise. “You’ve been inside his room?” she whispered hoarsely. ‘Artoo, that’s dangerous! You could have been caught!’ she paused a moment, becoming too curious. “What’s in there, anyway?”

“Not a lot,” came the blunt reply.

“Won’t he realize what you’ve done? He’ll destroy you for sure!”

“The security droid won’t say anything because it wasn’t suspicious activities.” Somehow, the senator got the feeling her droid was being smug. “I went in with Threepio and had clearance. The droid is only programmed to alert Vader if one of the triggars is detected.”

The senator blew out a steady breath, pushing her hair out of her face. How in the galaxy had she managed to get such a droid? The last time she checked, astromechs were designed to help repair things, not go on secret missions to collect data. “Be careful, Artoo,” she responded at last. “I don’t want you getting hurt.”

The little droid all but shrugged off her concern, before becoming still again, informing her that he’d also found out about a secret military project. Frowning, she looked up at the droid in dread. Secret military projects were not good news. For anyone. She waited patiently for the droid to continue, but he didn’t respond, just brought up a single term: Imperial Planetary Ore Extractor.

“What...?” she frowned. “Did you get any more information?”

She’d heard something about this before, but hadn’t really thought much of it. It sounded like some sort of Imperial propaganda program to make the Empire look stronger. While it didn’t sound necessarily humanitarian friendly, it hadn’t seemed all that bad. She’d thought it was a stunt to make everyone impressed. But if R2 was bringing this up, it meant that he deemed it important. Another name soon popped up: DS-1 Orbital Battle Station.

A battle station? So the Empire was disguising a weapon as some sort of workers project? It shouldn’t surprise her, but she was becoming more and more concerned. What did it mean by battle station? What sort of monstrosity were they constructing? Was this like a Star Destroyer, or was this something much worse? This had to be looked into. Hopefully they had time before it was made public. R2 hadn’t been able to get much information and apologized for not being able to tell her more about it.

“Artoo,” she began slowly. “This information has to be given to the Alliance.”

“I can’t do it!” the droid beeped out immediately. “Anything I send will be monitored as extensively as you’re being watched.”

“You can’t trick Threepio somehow and get this to them?” she frowned.

The droid shook his dome in a negative manner, and the screen read, “Sorry.”

Padmé sat back, thinking, allowing the pad to be pulled from R2’s connection. Of course R2 was right. He was in deep as it was. She didn’t want him to risk himself any further. She couldn’t lose him. He was one of the few things that was keeping her sane. She hadn’t asked this of her little friend, but he believed that it was his duty to help her. This would be wonderful if I could get more information, she thought. Being unable to help her friends for so long, she found she was actually excited to be able to do something again. But how could she get this information out?

The most obvious thing was to pass this information on to Bail or Mon when she was at the senate. But that would be difficult considering Cory was always around when she met with other senators. And then there was Vader to consider. She had the sinking suspicion that he was watching them, too. And even if he wasn’t spying, the Sith always made it a point to sit in on those meets when it was with her friends. He was not afraid to intimidate her or them. As a result, both Bail and Mon had stopped trying to make any sort of contact with her, even business related.

Maybe she could slip a pad with this information to them? She would have to think of some sort of excuse to meet with them. But if they read it while she was still there, and with Vader... that wouldn’t be very good. She would need to explain everything to them. But she couldn’t very well leave a message within. She had a feeling Vader would detect it. He somehow knew everything. She even had the suspicion that he had droids monitoring what she wrote and read when she was at work. And this information was definitely a trigger. It would be safer if she just told them about it, but she couldn’t.

A sigh escaped. This was harder than it should have been. Ridiculously so. If she brought a pad from ‘home’ it would look suspicious. If she wrote down this information, she would risk it being detected. She couldn’t talk to her friends without it looking suspicious and it wouldn’t be private, in any case. How in the galaxy was she going to do this? She needed to get this information to the Alliance. She had a very bad feeling that if she didn’t, the galaxy would suffer more than it already had.

“How can we do this, Artoo?” she sighed, flopping back on the bed. Her options weren’t looking very good.

She was about to ask if he knew any more information, when the com sounded. She had only enough time to sit up and smooth out her dress before it opened. Her face immediately paled. It was Vader. Of course, who else would it be? But her mind was racing. Why was he here? Had he heard her conversation with R2? Had he been alerted of suspicious activity? Did he know R2 had been hacking into the base accounts?

But she couldn’t let on that anything was wrong. Instead, she stood up and walked over to the Sith, who hadn’t technically stepped into the room. “Lord Vader,” she began neutrally. “What can I do for you?”

Vader looked down at her for just a moment, before he finally spoke. “I am called away,” he explained simply. “The same rules as before apply from the last time.”

He was turning to leave, but Padmé found herself reaching out. “Wait!” She actually managed to grab his hand before he could get away. As expected— for once— Vader jerked

his hand away, staring at her in fury, and for just a moment, the senator thought she could sense panic. But that was preposterous. It wasn't as though she could attack him. At least not very successfully. He really just must not like being touched unless he initiated it.

Instead of asking, he stood waiting for her to speak this time. He'd probably gotten used to her ways by now. That was a disturbing thought.

"Wait," she began again. "I just wanted to... about this afternoon—"

"That issue is no longer relevant," he waved her off as he turned to leave.

"It's still an issue with me," she posted her hands on her hips. "I'm still mad about what you said to me."

"If you're expecting an apology, forget it," he growled, crossing his arms. "It was a reasonable assumption based upon past experience and how you responded to the news."

"Yes, it might have been logical, but it wasn't exactly reasonable," she snapped. "Listen, I wasn't expecting an apology. I'm not that naïve. I'm not even looking for you to understand how the senate works in any form, or any sort of politics. I just want you to know that not everyone is like Cotrilla, that not all senators are bad. Some of us care. Some of us want peace and order in the galaxy, just like you."

Vader's breathing filled a suddenly awkward air between them. Padmé actually had no idea why she even bothered, but something was nagging at her. The events of the day wouldn't leave her alone. Things were about to become more complicated, and if he was going to start accusing her of things, she wanted to make certain that at least they were all true. Her reputation was extremely important to her.

"Did Artoo put you up to this?"

Padmé was floored. "Wha— No!" What did R2 have to do with this? 'I just wanted to show you that we don't have to fight all the time. That we actually have things in common. Granted, they're not very many,' she added quickly, suddenly wishing she hadn't said anything at all, but having to push forward, despite being disturbed by the idea, "but we do have them. I'm tired of getting into arguments with you all the time."

"Then I would suggest you keep quiet and it wouldn't happen."

The senator had to fight the urge to start screaming in frustration. "You're hysterical," she quipped drily. "But I'm trying here. Why can't you meet me half way?"

"Because I don't negotiate," he snarled.

"So you'd rather gain peace and order by simply destroying everyone and everything until there's nothing left to disagree with you?"

"If I had to."

How could anyone be like this? She found herself hating him all over again. "I bet you'd kill your own family if you thought it would bring order."

She hadn't thought before she spoke, but regretted it immediately. He went completely rigid, almost like she'd struck him. He just stood there breathing, and she stood staring with

wide eyes. She could feel the hatred and fury building up inside of the Sith. Unconsciously, she started to back away. She'd crossed a line. She wasn't sure what line it was, but it had definitely been crossed.

But after a tense moment, the Sith surprised her by responding softly, "I don't have family," before he stormed away without so much as a backwards glance. When the lift doors closed, she let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. He was gone, and he hadn't even yelled at her. He would be gone for days and she would be safe.

She dreaded, however, when he returned.

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That night, Padmé didn't sleep well. She dreamed of her family. They were suffering, locked in chains and beaten. They looked like slaves and she had the choice of either saving them or delivering the secret information about the Imperial battle station. It was as though she didn't have a will and delivered the plans without thinking, having to watch her family's horrified, betrayed expressions as she left them in their misery.

When she'd woken, she was cold and shaking. But it had only been a dream, she kept telling herself. It wasn't real. But she did have to think of a way to get these plans to the Alliance. She refused to stop and think about how far she'd go to deliver those plans.

Before going to the senate, she'd memorized as many planets on the list as she could, along with the exact name of the battle station and its code name. Maybe she could find an opportunity somehow today. It was worth a shot.

When she stepped out of the lift, she was delighted to see CT-585 waiting for her. As always. "Good morning, Cory," she gave him a slight smile.

He surprised her, by actually responding. "Good morning, Senator."

Lieutenant Pilon was also there, and seemed shocked that the trooper spoke so politely to her. She gave him a secretive smirk. "Good morning, Arlo."

"Good morning, Senator Amidala" Pilon nodded. "Are you ready to leave?"

"Yes," she nodded and followed the trooper and lieutenant to the hanger. Arlo drove them to the senate. Even though these two were nice enough to her, she was hesitant to call them friends. She was a rebel sympathizer, after all. She couldn't even talk to them without them fearing the repercussions of Lord Vader. But still, if she was going to have a chance at delivering the information she'd gained to Bail or Mon, it would be now, while Vader was away and with the men she was on friendlier terms with were watching over her.

Once at the senate, Padmé fell into her normal routine. She tried to make sure everything was as normal as possible, in fact. She only stopped working once lunch rolled around. When it was noon, she decided her time had come. She had one plan that came to mind and it was time to test it out.

As she walked out into the hallway, she found Cory standing guard. She smiled at him, before gesturing towards the cafeteria. "Ready to go?"



He didn't respond. He wasn't in as good a mood as yesterday. But then, finding an officer in the middle of a scandal was hard to beat. But it was nothing she wasn't used to, and she knew it was nothing against her. This was just how clones were programmed.

Half way to their destination, Padmé decided it was time to initiate the plan. "Cory," she began casually. "When I eat lunch, what exactly do you do?"

For a moment, she thought he wasn't going to answer, but eventually he responded. "I stand guard over you. Like always."

"Right," she nodded, allowing concern to fill her voice. "When do you get lunch?"

"When I'm off duty."

She frowned. Now that she thought about it, she really was concerned. She found herself feeling sorry for the trooper. "But that's at dinner time."

"Right," Cory nodded. "I eat then."

"So you spend the whole day not eating until night time?"

"Exactly."

"That's horrible." And she meant it. She felt guilty that he couldn't even eat while he was watching her.

"It's not so bad. I eat twice a day. Better than most beings."

"Still... Say, why don't you go on lunch break while I do?" she suggested. "You can get something to eat, take a break for an hour."

"I can't abandon my duties," he replied instantly. She got the feeling he was catching on to the fact that she had something up her sleeve.

"Of course not," she agreed. "But I just feel bad that you can't eat while I get to. That's not very fair."

"Life's not very fair."

He really wasn't making this easy. "Isn't there a way you can get a lunch break when I do?"

They came to a stop right outside the cafeteria doors. Padmé could see Bail and Mon inside. If only she could convince Cory to just take a break for ten minutes! Ten minutes was all she needed! Damn Storm Trooper loyalty!

"There is one way," he began thoughtfully. "I'll see you inside first."

The senator smiled, nodding eagerly. Was it really this simple? She thanked the Force she'd taken the time to be nice to this clone and to give him an excuse to talk to her yesterday. This was exactly what she needed. If she could have, she would've kissed Cory. "Sounds good," she agreed.

They entered the cafeteria together and Padmé went and ordered her food before choosing a seat near the windows, alone, as was becoming custom for her. When she took her seat, Cory actually set down his blaster next to her before he walked away. She was surprised, but

tried to hide it. Her eyes trailed the Storm Trooper, waiting until he was out of her sight before she could get up and talk to her friends.

It soon became apparent, however, that this wasn't going to be an option. Instead of leaving, Cory went through the line again, and came back to sit with her at the table with a tray of food. Once he was comfortable, he pulled off his helmet and grinned at her. Even though her plan had failed, Padmé couldn't help but smile back. At least she'd helped out someone.

"You know, Senator," Cory began, speaking even as he chewed his food. "You're one of the few people I've run across that cares about us troopers. You're all right."

"Thanks." It was hard to rally her spirits after this disappointment. But then, she'd been foolish enough to believe it'd be easy. "And you're the first Storm Trooper to actually talk to me with more than a word or two."

"Yeah, we're not known for chatting," he grinned before stuffing his mouth full. "You sure you don't mind bein' seen eatin' with me?"

Despite how deplorable his manners were, and the fact that she could see everything in his mouth when he chewed, it was still better than eating alone. And it was much better than having either Cory or Vader standing over her while she ate. "Not at all."

"Huh," Cory frowned thoughtfully. "Most people think we're an abomination. Don't want to be seen with us. You're the first big-shot I've seen that even tries to be nice and talk to troopers. Well, except Lord Vader. He talks to us."

Even though she knew she shouldn't, Padmé found herself once more impressed. Vader was a horrible, terrible monster, but he did take the time to talk to the fighting man. In fact, he was one of the few commanding officers that actually went into battle with his men. If there was nothing else, at least that was admirable about the Sith. He wasn't just a leader to these men, he was also a comrade.

"Yes, I've heard that," she nodded, distantly wondering what she could do now that Cory had taken this as an invitation to eat lunch with her rather than having some time to himself. She'd assumed he'd be like Vader, but that had been a terrible presumption. Clones were social, liked being with their brothers. Vader was a Sith that despised everything and a loner. It was her fault for forgetting that.

Lunch went by in a surprisingly sociable manner. It was odd to see Cory without his helmet, but even stranger to know that there were thousands of men out there that looked like him. She didn't bring up that fact, however, and tried to treat Cory the same as she would anyone else, even though he was the enemy. Besides, it wasn't his fault he served evil. It was how he was programmed.

It turned out that he was not like Vader in another respect: he liked to talk. At least when it was something he was passionate about. Padmé asked questions about his past expeditions on Corellia, and soon found herself listening to several interesting tales of grim battles. She knew Corellia hadn't gone down without a fight, and from the way Cory described it, it sounded like they made the Empire work for their submission. She hadn't expected any less.

They received several curious stares, of course, from other senators and personnel. But this was an actually pleasant conversation—except for the gory details Cory seemed to think necessary— and she wasn't going to give it up. For an entire hour they talked, and it was only when lunch was over and Cory put back on his helmet, intent to get back to work, that Padmé remembered how lonely she was. R2 had been great to have around, but he wasn't the same thing as a living being to talk to. It was almost pathetic how much she ached to be able to talk to someone. Cory had been great, but she'd had to watch what she said. She wanted to be around those that she didn't have to be on guard around.

There had to be away to get Vader to let her talk to someone normal! It had been months since she'd first been imprisoned in his care. She missed her friends and her family. She wasn't sure she'd gone so long without contacting her parents. They must be worried sick, especially since she hadn't been able to tell the queen anything particularly comforting. What was she going to do?

All thoughts of loneliness and family fled, however, when Cory bumped her side with his elbow. "Watch out, Senator," he said in an unexpectedly playful tone. "There goes Oquier's little 'fresher whore."

Looking over, Padmé saw Cotrilla. The other woman wasn't even near them, but Cory's voice carried enough that a lot of people heard... and turned to see where the trooper was looking. Ritia's face went blank before she stormed away. Even though a part of her wanted to laugh, Padmé couldn't help but feel sorry for the other woman. How desperate had she really been to have to sleep with people to get anywhere in life?

"Shh, Cory," she scolded. "That wasn't very nice."

"Neither was she," he responded bluntly. He really didn't care about the woman, which was a bit chilling. She really wasn't on Naboo anymore. Her people always seemed so much friendlier than those here on Coruscant.

When she made it back to her office, Padmé sat down, after thanking Cory for the lunch. Work was harder to get done now than before. For some reason, she kept thinking about Naboo. It was so much different than Coruscant. The same truths didn't hold true here as they did on her home planet. Cotrilla had told her as much. On Naboo, everyone was given a chance. How was it that a woman like Ritia had to use her body to even get any notice? Again, she wondered how desperate the redhead had to have been when she first made the decision to give herself up as a sacrifice. Maybe it had all started because she had nothing and needed to help her family?

Padmé's dream entered her mind, and she shivered at the thought. If it had been between her family's lives or her own body, a part of her knew she would rather make the sacrifice than have her family suffer. It was scary to even think about, so she tried not to.

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Vader stood overlooking the construction site of the Death Star on Despayre. There had been complaint that the Wookiee workers had been giving trouble to their overlords, and the Emperor had sent him to investigate. Of course when he arrived, there seemed to be nothing amiss. But still, his presence increase efficiency. The threat of him coming must have ended

the trouble, and his presence ensured that no one was going to be acting up for a very long, long time.

But unlike the last trip off Coruscant, Vader was not pleased. Being away was always a delight, but unlike last time, he was not focused. He'd tried to meditate on the Vengeance on the way over, but his thoughts were too troubled. The senator's words kept bouncing around in his head viciously. I bet you'd kill your own family if you thought it would bring order!

He closed his eyes, trying not to remember, but it was hard. Very hard. He always felt a stab of pain when he thought back to that fateful day. He'd been so young, he hadn't realized what he was doing. Had it really been his fault? He'd blamed himself for so many years, but it didn't change the facts. It didn't bring her back...

This wasn't how a Sith Lord was supposed to behave. A Sith was not to feel guilt, nor concern. A Sith looked to the future, for power. So why then could he not escape the snares of the past? Why did he feel this way? Why did he care?

Senator Amidala didn't know how it felt to have nothing, and then lose what little you had. She didn't understand that order was all he had left. He had his power, but there were moments when it just... didn't seem worth it. It was a shameful admittance for a Sith, but he couldn't help but feel this way. All he'd ever wanted he could not have. Not now anyway. He'd sold his soul to hell to get where he was now, and he'd enjoyed it. Hadn't he?

Staring down at the Wookiees, he couldn't help the dread that settled over him as he watched them labor. He knew how it felt. He knew how it felt to be forced to do what you didn't want to. To work until your hands bled. To go to bed hungry. To hear loved ones cry and moan in agony. There had once been a time when he'd vowed to free all the slaves in the galaxy. Now look at yourself, a voice whispered in his mind. You're the monster enslaving them.

But he'd grown up since these poisonous dreams. He understood the real world. Not everything could be perfect. Not everyone could be free. Sometimes, for the good of the whole, you had to sacrifice others. These slaves were working on something important — it would benefit the galaxy once it was completed! Who cares if thousands of Wookiees here were enslaved? Who cares if millions of other beings were enslaved elsewhere? What was important was the fact that their suffering would not be in vain. Those slaves within the Empire were laboring so that the rest of the trillions of beings didn't have to. So that everyone else could live and be free and safe.

But for whatever reason, the excuse didn't sound so good to him now. In fact, it left a bitter taste in his mouth. Just as it did when he thought too extensively about the thousands of beings he'd killed. At the time it'd always felt so right, felt so good! But there were instants, like now or when he slept, when he was trapped, and his crimes weighed heavily upon his heart. He never realized he still had a heart until those poignant moments.

What had he become? He was trapped in this life now, however, and he couldn't change it. She might be gone, but maybe it was for the best. She would have hated what he's done, what he's become. She would have hated him. He couldn't stand the thought of that. He had always cursed the Force that he hadn't been able to fix her, but maybe it was all for the better. It had saved her a broken heart, at the very least.

It was a bitter comfort, and it didn't release Vader from the crushing loneliness. He deserved to feel like this. In the back of his mind, he'd always know. Men like him didn't deserve families, didn't deserve to have anyone care about him. Not after all he'd done. All he wanted to do. But that didn't stop the yearning. Maybe one day, when his master was gone, he could find something to ease this ache. Or maybe one day he could just forget. How wonderful it would be to just not remember? It was at times like these he wished he was a droid so he wasn't cursed with these feelings.

"Lord Vader." Turning, he found himself staring at a young man, only the rank of cadet on his collar. He was from the Vengeance's crew.

"What is it?" he snapped. He didn't feel like talking to anyone.

The young man appeared worried before he straightened up and was the picture of composure. He would make a fine commanding officer one day if he showed aptitude for it. "Sir, Captain Oquier's been brought down in binders. What are your orders?"

The Sith felt a wicked sense of pleasure in punishing this man for his crimes. There really was nothing good left in him. "He is to be stripped of his command and rank. He is now Ensign Oquier. Assign him to something here. I don't care what."

The cadet bowed slightly. "Very good, my lord."

With that punishment delivered, Vader turned back to watch the slow progress on the ground below. It was time to harden himself again. The Dark Side was waiting for him. Nothing else mattered now. He had nothing else now. It was time to look towards the future, before he was driven mad by the past.

## 10. Desperation

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She was absolutely crazy. She knew she had been cracking for a while, but now she had finally snapped. It couldn't be helped. She'd been alone for so long it made sense. But oh how she wished she could have held on to sanity for just a little bit longer!

It had all started the day after she had first had lunch with Cory. Rumor about Cotrilla's little rendezvous with Captain Oquier in the 'fresher had spread throughout the senate like wildfire. The poor woman could hardly walk into a room without people barely stopping their whisperings about her. Some still whispered when she was in the room. Even though she didn't like her, Padmé felt terrible for the other senator. In a way, this was her fault. She'd been the one to discover them. Had she not been so curious as to what the sound was, no one would have found them. Well... maybe someone would have.

But what was so annoying was the fact that everyone talked about it. She couldn't get away from the talk. All anyone seemed capable of speaking about was the scandal. It was annoying. It made her feel horrible because, for whatever reason, she couldn't stop trying to see the event from Ritia's point of view. Maybe she had a good reason? Desperation could lead a person to go to the extremes.

Which brought her back to insanity. As she'd been pondering over a new plan to get information to the Alliance, it had come to her as a simple thought, one spawned of boredom, desperation, and sarcasm. But even though it had originally been more of a joke, it had stuck. No matter how hard she tried to forget it, it wouldn't go away. It was so ludicrous, crass, and just plain suicidal that it had been burned her into her brain. It scarred her and she dreamed about it.

No, no, no, she shook her head for the millionth time. This had to stop, before she actually went through with it.

But here she was, sitting up late at night, thinking about him. What made it all the more terrifying was the fact that she was becoming pathetically desperate. When Padmé became desperate, she did very crazy things. Things that were dangerous and could very well make her regret.

Padmé Naberrie Amidala wasn't exactly known for playing it safe. If she had, Naboo might have been completely taken over by Separatists or worse by now. She could never sit down while she could do something to help. Like now. It was her moral obligation to get this information to the Alliance. She had to do whatever it took. Even if it was crazy. Even if she would never be able to live with herself again...

Padmé stood and went to stared at herself in the mirror. Her hair was down and she was in her nightgown. It was twenty-three hundred hours. Lord Vader had gotten back several hours ago. He'd been gone for nearly a week, and during all that time she hadn't been able to stop thinking about him. About this insane plan.

I can't do this, she sighed, grabbing the counter of the sink for support. How could she? It was crazy! It would never work! And yet the idea just would not let her rest.

But the more she thought about it, the more it appeared as though it were her only option. She hadn't been able to talk Arlo or Cory into anything with Vader gone. Vader was the heart and soul of all of this anyway. If she were going to try and trick or negotiate anything, it had to be with him. And even though the Sith had infamously told her that he didn't negotiate, she was going to make him listen to her. She just needed to have the proper leverage over him, the proper bribe, even if she didn't like the term.

This would only make her look like a hypocrite, she knew. After the way she'd yelled at him a week ago, how she berated Cotrilla. But the other woman had been right. Padmé had been living in a dream, a place where she thought talking reasonably and pointing out facts would be good enough. It wasn't. Not with men like Vader. Power was the only thing the Sith cared about. And there was only one power that he didn't have that Padmé could give.

She let her head drop to her chest. But could she give it to him? Sleeping with Darth Vader was not only crazy, it was potentially deadly. He could very well kill her after he'd used her. But she had to try. She could negotiate this with him. An hour of unscreened, unmonitored conversation with friends every day in exchanged for giving her body to him every night.

It would never work. Vader would be too suspicious. He would know she was up to something, or that she could get up to something. And there was the obvious fact that thus far he hadn't responded positively to being touched. Hard to bribe anyone with sex if they didn't like being touched. And then there was the ambiguity of his sexuality and species. Would he even be interest? Thus far he'd appeared asexual, and if he wasn't, were their species even compatible? She'd never seen him respond to women of any species at all. He was always indifferent. He would never go for this.

But what if he did?

She'd had dreams of this for almost a full week now, ever since the thought had entered her head. Nightmares, really. But they were always the same. She refused to put aside her pride, put her reputation in front of everything and everyone else, and the galaxy had suffered for it. Her family had suffered. Even though she wasn't sure why, Padmé had the desperate feeling that this information had to get to the Alliance. She was only one person in the grand scheme of things. Her life was insignificant compared to the whole. So what if she suffered? So what if she even died? Her life wasn't worth endangering the galaxy. She had to try.

Brown eyes opened to stare at her reflection in the mirror. Piercing panic and revulsion shot through her. How could she do this? She would be ashamed of herself for the rest of her life if she did this. That is, if Vader didn't kill her before that. Vader was the vilest creature she could image, save perhaps the Emperor. Could she really live with herself if she allowed him to touch her in the most intimate manner possible? What would she tell her future husband? Could she ever look into any man's eyes again and not be reminded of him? Could she look into anyone's eyes again and not feel disgust for herself?

Vader wouldn't go for this. She'd been watching him for months and nothing had pointed to her that he was interested in being physical with anyone. People were expendable to him, and he'd said himself that he only kept droids here in his wing. Ritia had tried flirting with him and he'd only shown contempt and hatred. He hadn't treated Padmé much better.

That's not true, an annoyingly analytical voice in her head reminded. He'd choked her that first day, yes, but since then he hadn't touched her much. He'd grabbed her shoulders a week ago, but eased his grip, as though realizing he was hurting her. And the same day, he'd guided her into the speed, touching her back ever so slightly. But those could have been nothing. They were nothing. But he'd also let her get away with yelling at him, talking back, being late, giving into her demands when she'd wanted her things back, and more peculiarly, he'd saved her that one day when Ritia had come to her office to yell at her. He'd also allowed her to eat in the cafeteria even though he hated it. What did it all mean?

These instances were not consistent with his reputation. But then, what was? Darth Vader did whatever the hell Darth Vader wanted. Staying within the norm didn't apply to him.

The more she thought about this crazy plan, the more reasons for it to fail kept popping up in her mind, but also, the more she felt she needed to try. There was something telling her to go for it. Her gut, despite churning with fear and loathing, was telling her she had to do this. Padmé Naberrie Amidala did not give into fears, and she did not ignore her gut feelings.

She would hate herself for the rest of her life, she knew that, but at the same time, she'd hate herself if she didn't do this. It was a choice between hating herself for the rest of her life or hating herself for all eternity. This is important! she kept chanting to herself, even as she made sure all her makeup was still in place. This was her most desperate hour, and there were no Jedi around to help this time. This time, Padmé had to do this. Alone.

When she entered her bedroom again, she grabbed her outer silk robe and pulled it on, tying it at the side. She began to shake, but she swallowed her fear. This was wrong, but it had to be done. As she walked out into the hall, she repeated the story she would tell over and over in her head. She had to make this convincing.

A gasp escaped when the door at the end of the hall opened. She spun around in a panic, afraid that it was the Dark Lord himself. She wasn't ready to face him just quite yet! But to her relief, it was merely C-3PO scuttling out of Vader's quarters.

The moment the droid saw her, he came bustling over. "Good evening, my lady! Do you need anything?"

"Yes, I..." she trailed off, trying to find her courage. "Um... D-do you know where Lord Vader is?"

"He's in the conference room just there," the droid pointed to one of the doors down the hall.

"Oh. He's in a meeting? At this time of night?" Her more cowardice side was relieved. Maybe this could wait until tomorrow.

"Oh no," 3PO exclaimed cheerfully. "He's merely working on reports. Do you need to speak with him?"

"I... Yes. Yes I do." It was lucky that the protocol droid hadn't picked up on how nervous she was yet. Or maybe he had and just hadn't mentioned it.

"Well, I'm sure he has some time you could schedule for tomorrow. Should I inform him that you wish to set up a meeting?"



“No,” Padmé shook her head, pulling her robe around herself more securely. “I need to speak with him now. Just for a minute. Do you think you can show me to the conference room?”

Of course 3PO was ecstatic to help her, and showed her to the door of the room immediately. She had to tell him several times that he didn’t need to announce her or go in with her. This was just something she had to do on her own. So when the worried droid was finally away and going about his normal duties, Padmé took several moments outside of the door, taking deep breaths. She could do this. She had to do this. There was no other way. This was important and this information had to get to the Alliance. So after a final deep breath, she opened the door.

The room looked like any other: bland, clean, and completely empty save for a long table and chairs all around. Vader sat at the head on the other side by the window with pads and holos scattered all around. His head snapped up the moment the door opened. Padmé stayed just at the entrance.

They stared at one another for several long moments before Padmé plucked up some courage and simply said, “Good evening.”

The Sith didn’t respond, just stared, before looking back down at his work. “What do you want?”

His anger and rudeness was familiar in this unfamiliar situation. She latched on to it, strangely comforted by it. “May I come in?” she asked quietly.

“No,” he replied shortly, already shutting down the holos that were up. “You are not to be in here while I’m working. This is classified information.”

Naturally her curiosity was peaked, but she couldn’t think about the secrets right before her now. Not with everything else going on in her mind. “I’m sorry,” she apologized, forcing her voice to remain steady. “But I really need to talk to you.”

“Then talk.”

“In private.”

The Sith looked over at her again, and it made Padmé wish she could see his expression. He’d be a lot easier to read if it weren’t for that damned mask. “Senator,” he said, crossing his arms. The act made him look arrogant when he sat as opposed to threatening like when he stood. It was obviously a habit, but it was strange how height made all the difference. “We are the only two sentient beings on this floor. How much more private could it be?”

Padmé forced herself not to squirm or feel embarrassed. Vader was in a strangely lenient mood at the moment, she should take advantage. It was rare, after all. Maybe she’d get to live to see tomorrow. “Please?” she asked, crossing her own arms, but more from being cold than to intimidation.

Vader paused before he gathered up all the pads around him and turned them off. He put them in a stalk beside him before turning back to her. In a strangely business-like gesture, he motioned for her to take a seat. It almost made her feel like she was a child at school again. But she did as commanded and sat a few chairs away from him.

When she didn't say anything, his impatience got the better of him. "Well?"

"Right," Padmé breathed. She could do this. She had to do this. 'Look,' she began, looking straight into his mask, right where his eyes should be. "I'm tired, lonely, and, quite frankly, I think I'm going insane." Vader didn't respond. "I need more human interaction."

The senator expected some sort of sneering remark from the Sith, but instead, he remained silent. It was irritating as much as it was unnerving. She decided to carry on. "Please, I want to be able to talk to my friends at lunch without having a Storm Trooper or you breathing down my neck."

"No."

Right. He'd been gone only a week, but she should have remembered his love of crushing hopes with only one word. "Lord Vader," she began again, "I'm seriously afraid I'm going to have a mental break down if I don't get some normal interaction with people that I care about. I-I'm so tired of having to watch what I say all the time for fear that it'll be taken the wrong way. I'm tired of only talking about business. What little conversation I have with anyone else only lasts a few minutes or is with Imperial Officers, Storm Troopers, or you. Keeping me locked away like this is not healthy. I want to be able to talk to my family, to see my friends!"

Padmé had gone over all of this before speaking to the Sith in hopes that he would not suspect her of having any ulterior motives. It wasn't until then when there were tears stinging her eyes that she realized that a great portion of her reasons for even attempting her newest plan was mostly because she really did miss everyone. She was so lonely she hurt. Even Vader, as mechanical as he was, should be able to see that, to hear the truth in her voice.

The Sith, however, appeared to be unmoved by her display. "No."

"An hour a day," she pleaded on. "That's all. Just one hour. Maybe at lunch. Just one hour where I'm not being suffocated by security. Please!"

"No. Now get out."

"How can you be this way?" she cried, now unable to stop herself. She'd bottled it up for so long, she was cracking. She couldn't help the tears that ran down her cheeks, she was just so angry. Angry at him and at herself, for what she was going to do. "I've been held captive for nearly three months. Months and I haven't done anything wrong! I've played the Emperor's little game, but I'm sick and tired of it! I need to see other people! This isn't healthy!"

Vader remained still. If he was uncomfortable with the scene she was making, she didn't care. It felt good to be able to yell at him like this. She'd been silent over this too long.

"I have no one now! I can't speak to my friends or family, and those friends I can, you've scared too much that they will hardly look at me! You've sent away my handmaiden, and I have only my droid now. Please, if you've ever had a heart, listen to me!"

"Your pleas are wasted on me, Senator," Vader snapped, sounding especially harsh. But something in Padmé told her to keep pressing. Despite the anger she heard, she knew she had to keep trying.

"Please," she ignored his words. "I-I know what I said the other day, but you leave me no choice. I've never done this..." Kriff, was she really going to do this? "I don't want something for nothing," she explained carefully, angrily wiping her tears away.

The Sith stiffened. "You're bribing me?"

"No," Padmé became still, emotionless. "A trade."

Now Vader seemed interested. She didn't know how she knew considering that he still had the mask and he didn't look any different, but he felt different. The air was still dark and angry, but she thought she could catch a hint of curiosity. That was good. As long as he was curious he wouldn't dismiss or hurt her. Maybe that's another thing they had in common: they both were too curious for their own good.

"And what do you possibly have to trade?" he asked. "I already own all that which I want. And money is but an object to me, one which I have excess of."

"Something that you can't buy." She was really doing this. "Something you don't have, and can never have unless you take me up on this offer right now."

For the first time since knowing him, Padmé watched as the Sith sat forward in his seat, lacing his hands together in front of him on the table. It was an oddly business-like posture, one that didn't look completely normal coming from him. She could hardly believe it. She, Padmé Naberrie Amidala, had Lord Darth Vader, Heir to the Empire, on the edge of his seat. If this wasn't such a grim occasion and she wasn't going to ruin herself, she might have found it amusing. As it was, she could only take notice and file it away for later.

"You are finally going to tell me what you know of the Rebel Alliance?" he asked deathly serious.

"No," she shook her head, several strands of hair falling into her face. "I don't know anything about them," anymore, she added silently to herself. That was true. The rebels changed codes frequently, and the moment word got out that she was being monitored, they had probably changed bases and everything. So what she said was completely true... from a certain point of view. Vader wouldn't be able to accuse her of lying.

Sadly, however, the air between them shifted, and the Sith was becoming more impatient and frustrated. The rather mild mood for the Dark Lord that had been before was evaporating faster than water on Mustafar. She had to act quickly or risk losing him completely. "Then you have nothing I want, Senator," he replied shortly, sitting up straight.

"I have one thing!" Padmé argued. 'I know what I said the other day, and I've never done this before,' she was rambling, but she couldn't stop, "but I'm desperate and it's all I have." Vader waited for her to continue as she tried to plucked up her courage. "I'll let you... sleep with me."

Silence.

The entire room became eerily still. Even Vader's breathing seemed to become too quiet. The air around the Sith was always cold, but suddenly it was freezing, and it froze Padmé in her place. Her heart stopped for one eternal instant. They stared at one another.

"Get out," he hissed.

Padmé gasped as the air seemed to shatter at his command, but knew she had to continue. “An hour a day is all I want, for a night. Or... or an hour for whenever you want me.”

“Get. Out!”

“No one will have to know! I-I live here with you. You only have droids, no one will suspect a thing!”

The senator flinched when Vader shot to his feet. He was radiating rage, and she began to fear that she’d finally gone too far. He was going to kill her. She remembered his reaction with Cotrilla all too clearly, why had she thought he would be kinder to her? She should have known he’d be too insulted and enraged when any of this was suggested for him. But she had tried. Maybe R2 would be able to get the information to the Alliance somehow.

As she tensed, waiting for her death, she watched instead as Vader stormed out of the room, not sparing her a single glance. He left her gasping from the adrenaline rush. The moment he was gone, she felt abruptly empty and ashamed. More ashamed than she ever had in her life. She immediately burst into tears. Tears of relief, humiliation, and anger.

Running back into her bedroom, she fell into bed. She cried herself into a fitful sleep.

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Padmé was startled awake when the door opened. At the sound of the door, followed by the hissing of a respirator, she was alerted to the arrival of her guest. Darth Vader had returned for her. But for what purpose, she didn’t know.

Jumping to her feet, the senator felt a slight rush to her head. She didn’t want to be caught lying down with the Sith in the room. She glanced over at the clock. It was one in the morning. What was he going to do to her? Was he here to kill her for the ultimate insolence?

Vader filled the doorway, the light from the hall flooding in behind him. They stood facing each other, Padmé’s heart racing as she waited for his judgment. What would he do to her?

“I will agree to your conditions, Senator, on three conditions,” his rumbling baritone shattered the silence. Padmé’s eyes widened and she stopped breathing. She had to force herself to nod. This wasn’t happening.

“One: You will have one hour a day to communicate with whomever you choose free of interference whenever you give me an hour every evening. Two: You will tell no one about this, or I will kill you. Three.” He hesitated, as though he was also unable to believe he was agreeing to this. “You must always wear a blindfold when we... engage in each other’s company. Are we clear?”

Padmé was shaking and there were tears in her eyes, but she nodded. She should be happy that her plan had worked, that she would soon be able to help her friends. But the moment was terribly bitter. She wondered if she would be able to stand the utter disgrace.

Hesitantly, Vader came into the room, the door sliding closed behind him. It all went dark, and only the sound was his respirator filling the air. She wouldn’t have been able to see him had it not been for the lights on his chest. But she remained perfectly still, letting him come to her. She had to stop herself from becoming sick.

The moment she felt the cloth over her eyes, she gasped and had to bite her lip to keep from crying. Vader tied the blindfold on tightly, but not so tightly that it hurt. She supposed she should be grateful for that. As she waited in dread, she heard a strange sound, but she didn't feel him touch her. It almost sounded like a vacuum being opened. When the hissing of the respirator was no longer in the air, she realized what it was. He'd taken off his helmet. Lord Vader could take off his helmet.

Gloved hands grabbed her around the waist, and Padmé couldn't help the small sob that escaped. The hands stalled for a moment before picking her completely up off her feet and setting her down on her knees on the bed. She trembled as she heard more noises coming from him, these sounding like he was undoing a belt. She was made to wait in fear for several minutes before the hands returned, this time lifting up her nightgown. This couldn't be real. What had she done?

He literally ripped her panties off, and she felt his gloved hands on her hips. She closed her eyes, bowing her head as humiliation filled her. She couldn't even blame him this time. This had been her offer. It wasn't rape if she was willing. But then, just how willing was she?

It was strange to hear him breathe and it not coming out as a hiss. His breath wasn't all that loud, sounded like any man that had exerted himself too much. Or was growing more aroused. Another shiver of dread filled her.

Suddenly, she felt it. She was biting her lip so hard she was sure it was bleeding, even as the tears streamed from her eyes, but she didn't dare make another sound. She could feel it pressing against her maidenhood. This was it. He was going to take it all from her. She was about to become something she'd always despised.

A cry of pain erupted from Padmé before she could stop it. She hadn't been prepared for the sudden entry. She gasped and panted, even as more tears streamed from her eyes. She felt him. He had broken her. But he wasn't all the way inside, she realized with horror. He'd paused.

After she caught her breath, she felt him begin to rock, pushing further and further inside each time. It wasn't fast, and it hurt. It was almost as though he were being cautious. This was almost worse, and she wished he would just get it over with. She wanted this to just be done with.

As if sensing her thoughts, Vader pushed himself all the way in. Padmé let out another cry. It was so strange to have something inside of her like this. It hurt. He was too big. She wasn't used to this, and either Vader wasn't either or he was being considerate of her feelings. Neither seemed plausible.

But after another moment's pause, he grew impatient. He began rocking again, and the more he rocked, the more Padmé found herself feeling confused and lost. Her body began rocking in time with his, his hands on her hips making it so. Her ass hit up against his hips in time, and she felt his hot breath on the back of her neck and shoulders.

The longer this went on, the rougher Vader got. One hand remained on her hip, slamming her back into him anxiously, the other sneaked to her neck, ever so gently grabbing it, stroking it, as though he were going to strangle her if she did not please him. His breathing became labored, and Padmé found herself feeling more confused as time went on. Something

was happening to her, her stomach was tensing, and she wasn't quite sure what it meant. She couldn't think properly.

Harder and harder Vader drove into her, and the more he did, the more Padmé found herself responding to him. Once a moan escaped her lips, she couldn't stop herself. And when the first moan slipped, the more voracious Vader became. It spurred him on, apparently giving him encouragement. Faster and faster until they were both frantic. The sound of skin slapping against skin filled Padmé with shame, but she found she couldn't stop herself from moving. She didn't want to stop. Something had built up inside her and she needed release. Force she needed it.

"Please!" she cried out at last, unable to contain herself. She wasn't even sure what she meant by it.

At last, everything exploded into white bliss and she cried out. A wave of the purest pleasure washed over her, and a moment after she felt Vader spasm behind her, groaning as he released. They were both left gasping, Padmé felt her legs shaking and was being held up by Vader. But when she felt him pull away, reality came crashing back down all around her, even as he let her fall onto the bed.

What had she done?

There were sounds coming from his general direction, like he was adjusting his belt, but she didn't respond. She lay perfectly still until she heard the door open and close. She waited a moment longer, before pulling off her blindfold. He was gone. He'd gotten what he'd come for. She was alone now.

Padmé fell back into the bed, bawling, overwhelmed with a range of raging emotions. She felt so dirty, so used, so ashamed. What had she done? What in the name of the Force had she done?

She cried until she had nothing left, but she didn't fall asleep that night.

## 11. Morning After

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The Force was an ever changing constant in the universe. It swirled and shifted. It gave beings the ability to manipulate object, people, and even see into the future, the past, and situations in the present that were occurring light years away. Yet reading time was difficult. The future was never set in stone. The Force was constant, but situations shifted. Those with the ability to tap into possible futures always had to be wary. No prediction was assured.

And that's why Obi-Wan Kenobi was sitting up in the early hours of the morning, thinking. He'd woken up from a strange vision, not knowing what it meant. Had it been just a dream or had he really foreseen something? Never once in all of his years studying as a Jedi, nor even after he'd been knighted, had he ever shown aptitude for such a thing. His talents had laid elsewhere. Normally such dreams would have been just that, dreams. Except when he'd woken this morning, he felt something.

The presence in the Force had shifted somehow, causing Obi-Wan to pause. His dream had been unclear, and he couldn't remember what it had been about exactly, just feelings really. In his dream—or vision?—the Dark Side of the Force that had settled over everything had suddenly just... froze. It stalled as though for one pure moment, there had been nothing. It had been so brief, even in the dream that it was almost as though it hadn't happened at all. Except now that Obi-Wan was awake, he felt a change. Not a very big one, he might have missed it had he not been looking for it, but it was there.

Something was happening out in the universe, and it gave him the hope that the balance would soon be tipped back on the side of Light. Perhaps it was time to contact his master.

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The next morning found Lord Vader in his room, pacing like a caged nexu, his mind in absolute turmoil. What had he done? How could he have let her do this to him? He'd finally recovered from what she'd done to him a week ago, but now this?

How in the galaxy had she come to such a drastic decision anyway? And why had he gone with it? Had she really been influenced that much by that other senator? He'd thought that Amidala hated Cotrilla. She'd railed against him, screaming at him that she wasn't like the other woman. She'd yelled at him for insinuating that she would take or make bribes. But now here she was, doing exactly what she had said she didn't do. What was wrong with her?

She was desperate. He knew that. She reeked of it. The moment she'd entered the room last night he could tell something was wrong. In fact, the moment he'd landed on Coruscant he could tell that she was upset about something. Her presence still very greatly affected him. But this? It was insane! How could he have let it go so far? How could he have let himself do this?

A part of Vader was so angry he wished he could go into her room and kill her. How dare she try to bribe him! She was no better than the filth she worked with. The only difference

was that she had waited later in her career to begin making deals of this sort. How dare she think he was so cheap!

But then he'd taken the bribe anyway, even as every fiber of his being had told him not to. He'd never had any sort of sexual encounters before. His master had greatly discouraged it, in fact. As a younger man, he'd been so focused on gaining power that he hadn't even thought about anything remotely similar to sex. It just hadn't seemed worth it. What good was a second of happiness to a lifetime of power? Wasn't power more fulfilling? Hadn't he just reaffirmed to himself on Despayre that power was all he needed? That anything else was a waste of time? He didn't need a family or anyone close to him. Having someone close to him meant that he risked losing them. He didn't want to ever experience that again.

His master had given into the weakness of the flesh before, though. It was no secret that there were concubines at the Imperial Palace. But then, his master usually killed the women he took. It assured that he wouldn't become too attached. Vader could have done that. If he'd actually been thinking, he could have fulfilled his curiosity and gotten a woman, slept with her, and then killed her when he was finished. It would have been easy. He'd killed before, and it would surely have helped him solidify his position in the Dark Side again.

But he hadn't done that. Instead he'd taken the senator's deal without much thought as he'd been too confused, anxious, and fascinated at the thought of sex. He'd given into the temptation, and he could not kill her. A part of him knew that he wouldn't have killed her even if he could. Somehow she'd known that he'd wanted her, even when he himself hadn't known, it was the only way to explain this! In all honestly, he wasn't interested in women. He wasn't interested in relationships of any kind. What he was interested in, which was the root of all of his problems, was Senator Amidala. She intrigued him. There was something about her. He'd never been so interested in anyone in his life, and yet somehow she'd come in out of nowhere and bewitched him. For all the wrong reasons.

Now he had taken her. She'd offered herself up to him and he'd given into the enticement. He would only be fooling himself if he denied he wanted her. She was the only creature he'd ever felt... stirred by like this. Was it lust? He'd never felt it for another being before. Or at least not this intensely. He'd always recognized beauty in females, but he'd never felt moved by it. Until now. He had taken her and she was his now. She'd offered herself up to him.

Could he keep doing this? The thought of passing up this opportunity and never engaging in sex again left an ache in his chest. Somehow the senator had awoken something deep inside of him. It was raw and primitive, and he would kill to do it again. The sensations he'd experienced last night... he couldn't rightly explain them. It had all felt so wonderful. At first it had been as though he'd been burning alive, drowning in fire. It had been almost painful, these feelings, but he'd wanted more. So much more. And the way she'd moved, the moans that escaped her throat... he'd never felt more possessive in his life when he'd first heard her. He'd wanted to make her sound like that again and again. And then she had begged him...

Kriffing Sith hells, Vader wasn't sure he'd ever heard anything so breathtaking in his entire life. She'd begged him. He still wasn't sure what she had really wanted, but he didn't care that much. All that he knew was that she wanted, he'd given, and he had never heard anything so beautiful in his life. He'd heard thousands of beings plead to him before, but none ever the way she had. He had felt her pain, but also her longing. She'd wanted release, just as he had,



and for the first time since he took his proper Sith name, he'd given someone what they'd wanted. It had felt wonderful.

But he couldn't keep doing this! It was wrong. What if his master found out? What if the senator told someone? She said she wouldn't and he'd threatened her, but still. Was that enough? Would someone find out? It was impossible that someone would find out. He secured his wing so that not even one of the Emperor's spies could get in or look through the windows. It was completely secure...But would it be enough?

Was it really worth it? To feel good for such a short time only to have everything else he'd worked so hard to achieve fall apart? He couldn't lose his power, his position. It was all he had left. He could potentially lose it if he gave into the pleasures of the flesh. Isn't that what his master taught him? Isn't that what he'd read in his training? To form such attachments was useless and harmful. Even the Jedi had known that...

Maybe he could do this. All he had to do was just not form an attachment to the senator. Normally, he'd think it would not be any trouble at all, except in this case, there was some sort of attachment. Ever since he'd met her there had been something about her. Something that drew him to her. He'd fought against it, railed, but he couldn't stop the magnetic pull. The Force had always been telling him something about her, and now, it was whispering for him to let go. To give in.

Vader had always allowed himself to be led by the Force, and it was leading him to Senator Amidala. Maybe there was a reason for this. Maybe he could do this.

But he couldn't dwell on this forever. He had work to do now. The senator had to get to work. A great sense of dread filled him at the thought of seeing her again. What would it be like? She had cried when he'd entered her room last night, and during most of their... encounter. He knew she'd cried after he'd gone. Did she regret this deal? Had he simply taken advantage of her desperation?

Why should he care? He was a Darth Lord of the Sith. He didn't care about anyone but himself. His goals were all that mattered. And besides, she had been the one to make this deal, not him. If she hadn't wanted to do this, she shouldn't have posed the offer into the first place.

Making sure his helmet and mask were secure, Vader strode out of his room. When he pressed the com on her door, it opened immediately. He was shocked. Senator Amidala stood ready, face absolutely pale, but her expression was blank. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her eyes... Normally they were so bright, full of life and determination, but now they were dull and red. She hadn't slept well if at all. She looked sick, but he knew she wasn't.

He motioned towards the lift, unable to find a thing to say. She didn't even nod, just started walking. They were silent on their way down, and it was hard to stand next to her in the lift without moving. She was so close. But she didn't move at all. She was stone next to him. He forced himself to remain still. Once out of the lift, his P.A. and the Storm Trooper were there waiting, but neither he nor the senator acknowledged them. It unnerved Vader that she didn't even nod to either of the other men. She was usually friendly towards them.

They walked on, both wearing their masks so that no one could see. The trooper followed faithfully, but his P.A. must have gotten the sense that he wasn't wanted. It was good. Vader wasn't sure he could listen to anything at the moment. Apparently everyone else picked up on his projection that he didn't want them near as well.

In the speeder, the three boarded. As always, the trooper went to the back, apparently aware that Vader could handle himself while the senator sat in the passenger seat. The drive was dead quiet save for his breathing. The senator didn't even look out the window, just stared straight ahead. When he focused on her emotions, he got a raging swirl of anger, disgust, shame, and sadness. She was regretting this as much as he was, if not more. But she was carrying on. It was admirable, in its own way. Maybe the senator had finally come to live in the real world at last, where not everything was a lush green paradise and big family picnics.

Good. Maybe she would realize just what she'd gotten herself into now. Maybe she would finally stop with all of her mischief in the senate. Though, strangely, there was something regrettable about the thought. He wasn't sure why.

Once landed and in the senate, Vader escorted Amidala to her office. She still had not made a sound. The trooper stopped just outside of the suite doors, but Vader walked her to her office. He stood in the doorway, watching as she took her seat, her face still set in stone, and immediately start working. He watched her for a moment, wondering if she was all right to be here. Maybe she should have stayed back at the base? But no, this is what she wanted. She wanted to talk to her friends and her body had been the price.

After another minute or so of watching, he turned and shut the door. The moment he did, the tiny presence of the senator that was in his mind snapped followed by a wave of sorrow. She was crying again, but that couldn't be helped. She'd made her bed, let her lie in it.

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By the time lunch came around, Padmé felt terrible. There were times she wasn't sure she could even leave her office, but this was the moment she'd been waiting for. She'd tried to work all day, but her mind kept returning to what had happened the night before. Tears would immediately burn her eyes, but she worked hard not to start sobbing. It wouldn't look good and people would start asking questions. She couldn't have that.

Though, it was hard not to remember. It had been... she wasn't even sure there was a word for it. He'd taken her without preamble, without warning. So many stories told of how wonderful sex was, of the pleasures it could afford when with your one true love or simply the right lover. They always depicted it as a fun, happy experience where the men and women first warmed up to each other; kissed, laughed, touched. There had certainly been none of that last night, not that she'd wanted any. Vader hadn't wasted time. He'd entered her, got his pleasure, and left. That was it. She'd never thought that sex could be so... cold. Impersonal.

But then, what had she expected from a Sith Lord? Foreplay? Vader had taken the deal based on the simple need to relieve himself and to experience pleasure. He could do that without hugging and kissing. She should have realized that in reality sex was nothing special, that it was just a crude bodily act in order to procreate.

Right?

While the majority of her first experience had been less than ideal, there had been... something. Honestly it hadn't all been pain or necessarily unpleasant. Towards the end especially, it had been... it had been incredible. It was like a bomb of pure ecstasy had exploded in her brain, causing her entire body to hum with pleasure. She would have never guessed that it would feel like that.

But that didn't make up for the fact of what she had done. What had happened... it was shameful and wrong. What she'd done had tainted her forever. But it had been necessary. She'd done what she had to for the greater good of the galaxy. By doing this, it was just her life that would have to suffer and not anyone else's. That was how she wanted it. This would hopefully be the end. If this information she'd discovered was as important as she'd thought, then her body was an acceptable loss.

Right?

When she shivered, she knew that Vader was near. She could feel his presence. It was time for him to keep his end of the bargain. She just hoped he wouldn't alter the deal in any way. She didn't think that she could handle it if he went back on his word. What was fragiley keeping her together at this point would shatter.

When the door opened, she schooled her features so that he wouldn't be able to tell that anything was wrong. It was useless to fool him, though, and he'd probably been able to read her mind or sense her or whatever he did. He probably knew for a fact that she was far from all right. But that didn't mean she would show it to him. She would never let him see her so vulnerable as she had been last night again. No more tears.

Lord Vader stood in her door way, looking the exact same as he always did. His breathing filled the room and her heart with dread. Just looking at him again caused her to remember what they had done. She could still feel the sore throbbing between her legs, and felt her face heat up. She still hurt. She even had bruises on her hip from where one of his hands had been nearly crushing it, though she hadn't felt it at the time. This thing had taken her, but in the end, he was the one that would lose. She would see to that.

Standing up as gracefully as she could, not looking into the masked face, Padmé carefully walked past him, making sure she didn't touch him. She didn't ever want to touch him more than she had to again. It would just be too much. And so it was a silent affair as they made their way to the cafeteria, Cory in tow.

Once they were nearly outside, Vader turned to her and spoke for the first time that day. "You may speak to your friends," he said evenly. "You have one hour. Trooper CT-585 will be watching from a distance. I will remain out here."

It was actually surprising that he was giving her the full hour. Last evening he'd told her an hour to speak with her friends for an hour of her time. While that horrid experience had lasted long enough, Padmé knew it hadn't been close to an hour. He was actually giving her the better end of the bargain if one ignored the emotional and psychological damage done. Was he up to something?

Instead of answering, Padmé nodded and entered the room. Cory walked with her through the line, getting a meal for himself, before he nodded towards her and went to sit by himself

at the table they used to always sit at together, leaving her free. Scanning the room, she saw Bail and Mon sitting calmly and she made a beeline for them.

Carefully, she sat down opposite Mon and beside Bail, not quite able to meet their eyes. Their shock was apparent, however, as their eyes grew large. “Padmé!” Bail turned towards her, reaching out for her, as if to hug, but stopping himself short. “By the Force, what happened to you?”

There was so much concern in those dark eyes, and Padmé could hardly stand it. He appeared so worried, Mon too, but she couldn’t help but wonder how they would react had they known what she’d done last night. She remained impassive, however, and would not let it get the better of her. She had work to do now.

“I only want to risk a few minutes as not to cause suspicion, so please, listen closely and try to memorize everything I’m about to tell you,” she didn’t waste time. “I have information that I believe is vital to our cause.”

The other two senators paused, sharing a glance, before turning back to her. “Our cause?” Mon raised an eyebrow.

“Yes,” Padmé nodded, suddenly getting a bad feeling. “I know I’m risking a lot, but you have to listen to me.”

Bail frowned with worry. “Padmé, what happened to you? You’ve been with Vader and Imperials and... well...”

“How do we know what you’re going to tell us isn’t an Imperial trick?” Mon finished, staring neutrally at the other woman.

Padmé was floored. She’d spent so much time obsessing over this information for the past week, agonizing over her decision to bribe or not to bribe Vader, given in, slept with the creature, endured eleven hours of torturing herself with regret and disgust, and now her friends didn’t even trust her? She hadn’t even stopped to consider what they might think about the last several months. She’d been so intent on giving this information that now she almost became sick when she was being denied, even if their suspicion was understandable.

“You think I’m a traitor?” she whispered, sounding much more broken than she would have liked.

For a moment it appeared as though Bail were going to deny it, but one stern look from Mon caused him to pause. “It doesn’t exactly look good when you’re not only staying with Lord Vader, but eating lunch and smiling with Storm Troopers,” the other woman explained bluntly, folding her hands on the table. “It’s been months and only now do you come to us?”

“I couldn’t come before,” Padmé argued. “I’ve been monitored strictly by Vader.”

“And now?”

Padmé hesitated. “We’ve made a deal,” she began cautiously. “I haven’t stepped out of line since being induced into his care, so he’s given me the freedom to have an hour to myself at lunch.”

If they didn’t believe her, she didn’t really care at the moment and they didn’t show it. She just hoped they didn’t figure out the real bargain that had been struck. She wouldn’t be able to

handle the humiliation.

“Can you trust him?” Bail asked, his hands working nervously under the table.

“He hasn’t planted any bugs on me, if that’s what you mean,” the younger senator almost snorted. ‘And he’s at the doorway of the cafeteria. To maintain his trust and to ensure that I don’t give him a reason to start spying, I only want to stay a few minutes,’ she stressed again. “Please, listen to me. Hear me out. I’m not trying to harm you or anyone else. Just listen. Use this information I’m about to tell you and investigate. Please!”

Mon appeared distrustful, but Bail was already nodded. “Very well,” the other woman sighed. “What do you have?”

“First, don’t react with any great emotions,” Padmé began. “Vader and the trooper could still be watching, though they can’t hear what we’re saying. And don’t make any moves to write anything down. Try to remember it. In the future, if I learn more, I will have Jar Jar deliver it to you.”

“The Gungan?” Mon frowned. “Can he be trusted?”

“Yes,” the younger woman said firmly. “I trust him with my life. In the future, I will be able to talk to him more freely and he can pass this information on next time.”

“Then why didn’t you do it this time?” Bail asked.

“Because I told Vader I wanted to reassure you that I was okay. And I needed to convince you, apparently, that I was still on your side,” she responded drily. “Now, please listen closely...”

Quietly Padmé began listing all the planets and trigger words that she could remember, as well other little tidbits R2 had learned over the last week while Vader was gone. She contemplated on telling them the few things she’d learned about Vader himself, but then decided against it. How could they use that information? And even so they might start asking questions about how she knew he could take off his helmet for at least a short time, or how she knew for sure there was at least some very organic parts contained in the suit. She couldn’t risk them finding out her shame. Not yet. It wasn’t worth it.

So in the end, she decided to tell them about the one, big thing that still needed to be told. “Do you remember hearing something about the Empire constructing an ore extractor?” she asked.

Bail shook his head in the negative, but Mon was nodding. “What about it?” she asked quietly.

Padmé leaned forward slightly while trying not to look as though she were. It had already been ten minutes, she wanted to leave before Vader got too suspicious. Lowering her voice, she said, “I have reason to believe it’s really a battle station.”

The other two were silent a moment, before Bail asked, “How do you know?”

“And what proof do you have?” Mon asked.

“What kind of battle station? What does it do exactly?”

"I don't know," Padmé admitted. "But its code is the Imperial Planetary Ore Extractor. My droid was only able to obtain its name, the DS-1 Orbital Battle Station. That's all I have, though I'll try to look for more on it."

The other two senators were silent for a long moment. "We'll look into it as well," Bail state firmly.

"After we check into all of this other information first," Mon added. "I want to believe you, Padmé, I do, but—"

"It's all right. I understand," she nodded. "I should probably go. I'll chat again, but I should probably stay away."

She was about ready to stand, when Bail caught her arm. His dark eyes were so full of anxiety that it nearly made her weep. "He tortured you, didn't he?" he asked softly.

A million thoughts ran through her mind at that moment. Should she lie to them? Again? She didn't want them to know the truth, but at the same time, could she lead them astray in their thinking like this? They were her friends, even if they were doubting her for the time being. She didn't like the thought of being a liar on top of everything else. But more annoyingly, she was finding it hard to accuse Vader of such a thing. At least when it came to her. He hadn't tortured her, at least not in the conventional sense. He'd only done what she had said he could. Nothing more. If she looked terrible, it was her own fault.

Looking away, Padmé decided that she didn't need to respond to that. How could she? Instead, she stood up. "I need to go," she said quietly. "Take care. Remember. I will have Jar Jar come speak with you in a few days."

With that, she got up and went towards her now customary table, where Cory was still sitting, eating his lunch. She felt Vader's eyes on her, and it made her skin crawl. But she tried her best to ignore him, and instead sat opposite of the trooper. Cory looked up at her with a bit of surprise on his face.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "I thought you were with your friends?"

"I was," she nodded. "I just wanted to make sure they knew I was all right."

The trooper frowned. "But why sit with me and not them? I thought Lord Vader said you had an hour to yourself?"

"I do," she nodded simply. 'But you're my friend too.' Cory looked shocked. "And a good friend doesn't let their friend sit all by themselves at lunch when they can keep them company."

Cory appeared very confused and stumbled out a, "But I'm just a clone," as if that was the excuse that could answer everything.

Padmé shrugged. "Not really," she said. "You're my friend. That makes you different."

A pause stretched out between them for a moment before the trooper's lips slowly pulled back and he smiled warmly at the senator. She'd never seen him look so pleased, not even when she'd given him his name. "That's the best thing anyone's ever said to me," he admitted. "You really aren't like other beings, Senator."

For just a moment, it seemed as though nothing had changed. She was still talking to a friendly Storm Trooper and she was sitting in the cafeteria to avoid being locked in her office with no Dark Lord in sight. For just a moment, she almost smiled. Once again, she realized that despite her world seeming to have spun off its axis, the rest of the galaxy kept turning. Even though one element had changed, nothing else had. She really was insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

Although she didn't feel like smiling, she was exhausted, sore, and ashamed, she gave Cory a small smile. He didn't know what happened, and he needed to know she wasn't upset with him. "That, I am not," her small smile slowly became genuine. "Not at all."

The trooper nodded happily before shoveling in more food into his mouth. They talked for about fifteen minutes, Padmé trying to eat something, though she certainly didn't have the appetite. Eventually, Cory realized she wasn't much in the mood for talking and suggested go back to her office. She still had time to herself, so maybe she could find Jar Jar and talk to him. There were plans that still had to be set into place. Vader might not have used all of his time last night, but Padmé'd be damned if she didn't milk every last nanosecond she had.

So when they stepped out of the cafeteria, once more just the senator and trooper and not friends, Vader was there, like a cold shadow, following them. He escorted her back and entered her officer suite with her while Cory remained posted just outside. Thankfully, Vader paused when she walked over to the Gungan, who appeared uncomfortable with having the Dark Lord so close.

Padmé turned towards the Sith and gave him an icy look, while raising an eyebrow, hoping he got the message. She didn't want to talk to him. Again, Vader hesitated. Did he want to talk to her? It was a horrifying thought, but he remained silent. Instead, suddenly, he turned around and stormed out, leaving the senator to feel oddly shaky.

"Are you'sa okiee-day?" Jar Jar asked in concern, standing up and helping her to sit in his seat. Ever the gentleman.

"No, not really," she admitted. "But I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask something of you, my friend. Something potentially dangerous."

The Gungan swallowed hard, but even though Padmé knew he was scared, he nodded. "You'sa can count on me'sa, Senator."

Yes, her life might have been shattered last night and the world was still turning, but Padmé had to smile at realizing that she had good friends that would stay with her and help her pick up the pieces.

## 12. The New Norm

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Padmé was not sure she had ever felt so relieved that it was the weekend in all her life. She had endured being taken by Vader only twice, the second time not much different than the first, but she already needed a break. Not for the first time she wondered how she'd let herself do this.

But her plans were working thus far. It was troubling to have Mon and Bail doubt her, but at least she'd given them the information she could, and if she knew Bail, the man would probably look into it despite his worries that it was all a trap. He was a good man and Mon was just being protective. She could understand that. And then Jar Jar had decided to help her, and things couldn't have been going better under the circumstances.

Lying back in bed, Padmé stared at the clock and realized it was after ten in the morning. She didn't really care, though. It's not like she had anything better to do than sleep. And anyway, sleep had been very hard to come by the last few nights since making this deal with Vader. The first night had been terrible and so too the following day. After she'd gotten home that night, she'd literally fallen into bed, dinner forgotten, and slept like a rock. That is, until Vader came again at one in the morning.

She shuddered at the memory of him once more walking in, forcing her on her knees on the bed, and then tying the blindfold over her eyes. She hadn't cried during it this time, but oh how she'd wanted to. Once more, after he was finished, he just left, leaving her to feel disgusting and wretched. She'd had to sit in the shower, as she had the first night, trying to get the scent off her skin. And as before, while the smell had gone, the feeling of filth lingered. Somehow she'd managed to fall back asleep that second night and get another few hours.

But last night, last night he had not come. It had been a Friday, meaning she didn't have to go to work the next day, which meant that neither of them had to honor their deal. At least for two nights. It had been hard to sleep, though, and she'd stayed up until one fearing he would come again. He hadn't, and so she'd fallen into an exhausted slumber only now waking up. She usually didn't sleep so late, but then, she normally didn't stay up so late either.

Pushing hair out of her face, Padmé stared at the ceiling, wondering how her life had gone so wrong. One moment she'd been happy with a loving family with a satisfying career, and then suddenly everything she believed in was under attack and she was sleeping with a Sith Lord. Funny how life worked. Funnier still was the will of the Force.

Even though she tried not to, it was hard not to think about Vader. About what they'd done together. Contrary to popular belief, Padmé found nothing beautiful about sex. From her two experiences it was impersonal and selfish. But then, this is what she wanted, wasn't it? She'd been hoping Vader would be selfish enough to seek gratification from her, and then she'd done it strictly for business reasons. Attachments—as unbelievable as they were to occur—would only complicate matters. She couldn't afford to get sentimental over Vader. Force, she'd already tried to see things from his point of view, she didn't need to go any deeper into this. She couldn't, at least not if she wanted to remain sane.



Automatically, her hand went to her hip, lightly pressing the bruises that Vader had left there. The second time he'd taken her, his hands had eventually ended up in the same pose as the night before. One hand pressing into her hips, bruising, the other lightly holding her neck, both pulling her closer to him. It actually amazed her that he hadn't choked her, but there were no marks left on her throat. It was strange that he had such a fascination with necks, apparently.

When she closed her eyes, she could still feel him, his touch, his breath on her bare skin, his rhythm. As ashamed as she was, Padmé had to admit that being with Vader wasn't all bad. Or at least it could have been a lot worse. He could have been one of those perverts that liked to tie women up or hit them. Instead, he'd asked merely to have her blindfold, probably only for the reason of keeping her from seeing his face, and held her hips too tightly. The more she thought about it, the more reasonable it seemed that he probably hadn't even noticed he'd hurt her at all. He'd seemed very cautious about his touches, and his reactions to things felt instinctive. Primitive. He'd taken care not to choke her as he stroked her neck, probably not even thinking about her hips.

And then there was the fact that he could make her body hum for hours when he was finished with her. Even as she felt horrid, she couldn't deny how strangely loose and relaxed her body felt afterwards, even as her mind quickly became distraught over what happened. Padmé had heard accounts from women that reported that they were very rarely satisfied with their lovers. Some females didn't even experience orgasms. They lived their lives in order to please their mates. As wrong as it sounded, that was not the case with Vader. Although it was most assuredly unconscious, he was an efficient enough lover to send her over the edge. When Vader had sex, he not only satisfied himself, but his lover as well.

The thought caused Padmé's face to burn with humiliation and she pulled a pillow over her head. Was it really so wrong to admit that sex was actually not all that terrible with Vader? She felt like she was betraying not only herself, but her family, her culture, and even the Rebel Alliance for admitting it. But it was true. Sure, it was a far cry from being perfect, but it was not bad in the basic sense. While it lacked the feelings and emotions of normal sexual experiences, it greatly succeeded in the ultimate goal: It felt good to both parties. She hoped Vader wouldn't realize that and become too smug about it. He already had a great power over her, she couldn't stand the thought of him lording this over her, too.

But he wasn't like that. Even though she knew so little about him, somehow the senator knew that Vader wouldn't gloat to her about this, at least not when there was anyone else around. Thus far he seemed hesitant, at best, when dealing with her. He'd stormed out of the room when she'd first proposed this arrangement, after all. He'd been clearly insulted. So what had changed? Why had he suddenly become so amiable to the idea? Surely it couldn't have been simple curiosity. Surely he'd had sex before? Maybe it was just loneliness? Maybe after all his time being alone, maybe he'd just wanted some sort of encounter with another being?

The thought of Darth Vader being a lonely, sad being left a bad taste in Padmé's mouth. Why did she always do this? Why did she try and rationalize things? Why did she try to understand beings that just weren't meant to be understood? This insatiable curiosity had to have come from somewhere, but she wasn't sure which side of the family to blame it on. It had to stop, however, lest she become too entangled in all of this mess.

Sitting up, she looked to where R2 usually sat the corner of the room when he powered down. The last few nights she'd managed to convince him to shut down so he wouldn't have to see her shame, but she had a feeling he knew what had happened. She was lucky he hadn't tried electrocuting her or something for being so stupid. There was just something about R2 knowing, however, that made her extremely sad. She didn't want him to judge her, even though she wasn't sure he was capable of it. But at the moment he wasn't here. He was probably doing whatever it was he did when she wasn't around. She was alone and she didn't like it.

Standing up, she went to the 'fresher and washed her face, while putting on a casual dress. Nothing fancy. Just something loose, and didn't even bother with her hair or make up. She wanted to go on a walk. She needed to get out of this room that held so many bad, confusing memories. There was a garden in the center of the base, maybe she could convince Arlo to walk around with her. It wasn't an unreasonable request, and it didn't involve technology of any kind, so no one would think she'd be out trying to steal information. She had R2 for that.

And so, without another thought, she left the room hoping that for once, luck would be on her side and certain beings would leave her alone.

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It was a most unfortunate thing to have someone on your mind while trying to work. All morning Vader had been attempting to hold meetings and do his much needed reports, but just couldn't do it. At nine-thirty he'd given up and headed for his hanger bay to continue working on some of the prototypes that had been sent to him. He'd com'd R2, and the droid had come to him without hesitation. In retrospect, it probably wasn't a good idea to make friends with the senator's droid, but he couldn't really help it. He liked the droid. R2 was surprisingly sassy and outspoken. It made him wonder how 3PO could stand to be around the astromech droid.

Despite his like of the droid, R2 unfortunately also belonged to Senator Amidala. The same woman that had been on his mind almost constantly for the last several days. The same woman that was distracting him from working on anything else.

The Force was a mysterious thing. It gave so much great power, yet it also controlled and manipulated on its own accord. For whatever reason, it had brought him and the senator together, and now he was cursed to brood over her. It wouldn't have been so bad had he not had his recent memories of her. Memories he shouldn't have, but memories he'd kill to retain.

She was going to be the death of him. He knew it. He was already going crazy. He'd been up most of the night pacing and dueling with droids. Last night he had not gone to the senator's chambers as it was the weekend. Weekends had not really been made clear in their initial agreement, but he was pretty sure since the senator wanted to talk to her friends whom she only saw at work, then that meant he couldn't take advantage of the benefits of having her. It was fair. It sounded so simple.

But it wasn't. It had taken all of Vader's strength of will not to go last night and have his way with the woman. He'd only had sex twice and already it was all he could think about. Did he really have so little self-control? This was pathetic! He'd gone days without eating or drinking anything, had spent weeks out in the wilderness devoid of any luxuries or necessities

in the name of training. Yet one small taste of the flesh and he could hardly stand to be apart from it? Pathetic!

He'd been locked up in this suit too long. The air supply had been switched with some sort of gas or his respirator was malfunctioning and was slowly kill him, causing him to hallucinate and act rashly. Surely these were the true causes of all of this? Surely these explanations were more plausible than anything else his feelings were telling him.

Actually, he wasn't even sure what his feelings were telling him, even though they were screaming at him. He had never been very good with relating to beings, that's why he preferred droids. But this mess was wearing him down. Fast. He had to contain this before it was too late.

But too late for what? That was the billion credit question. What was happening to him? Why did he feel the need to be with the senator? Surely if the Force was driving him to her, it would at least give him an explanation! That wasn't too much to ask for, was it?

Life liked throwing punches at him. From a young age he'd been beaten down, manipulated, abused, and neglected, but he'd endured. He'd taken everything life had thrown at him in stride and even come out the stronger for it. When hardships came his way now he'd learned to punch back, harder and faster. He had made sure that nothing in his life would ever hurt him again, save his own master. No one could touch him if he hurt them first, no one could leave him if he didn't have anyone.

That was different now, however. There was someone that could leave him, someone that could hurt him. Senator Amidala had wedged herself into his life. He wasn't sure where she fit in the grand scheme of things, but she was definitely in his life. So much so that he couldn't stop thinking about her. His mind had been almost completely taken over by the thought of the Naboo Senator. It was terrifying.

And here he was, left to wonder what would become of him because of her, what would become of her because of him? This was not healthy. To be so obsessed with one person, somehow he knew that it wasn't right. He'd learned this lesson before. Getting close to someone, loving until the point where your entire world was destroyed because they were gone... He'd made this mistake, and yet here he was, setting himself up for potentially the same failure.

Senator Amidala should mean nothing to him. He'd only met her several months ago. She was an enemy, he knew that. He knew she was probably using these hour sessions each day for a little rendezvous with other rebel sympathizers or rebels themselves. He wasn't so stupid as to think she just wanted to talk to her friends. The whole point of her staying here was to cut her off from everyone so that she would begin cracking, to feel as though she were insane. He'd set it all up so perfectly. Her mental health had actually declined faster than he would have thought. Had he let her continue communication at the office, it would have potentially taken up to a year before her confinement would have gotten to her. It was pleasant to see she had been breaking after only several months.

His job had been coming to a close. His work was almost done. A little more patience and within the next couple of months she would have broken and he would have been able to execute her and continue on with his life. It had all been going according to plan.

Except one thing. One thing hadn't gone the way it had been supposed to, and that was this infuriating pull towards the senator. She was the only being that had ever caused Vader to pause, to think. She was not Force sensitive, yet she had strange powers over him. It was something about her eyes, the way she looked at him. He had planned for everything in order to make her crack, yet he hadn't taken into account what her presence would do to him.

And why should he have? No one else had ever affected him like this. He'd never met anyone that made him so angry, yet he didn't want to kill them. He could admit that now. It would have been easier to have killed her the moment he'd entered the Palace and his master had introduced them. But it was too late now. The senator had amused him that first day with her fear of his flying. She'd impressed him by standing up for herself that first night. She displayed a certain authority that demanded respect. And her actions in the senate certainly deserved recognition. He'd heard of Senator Amidala before this mess, followed her career off and on with mild interest. Maybe that's why he'd been doomed the moment he'd met her. Because deep down, he'd always been a little curious of her.

R2's beeping brought Vader out of his brooding only to realize he'd welded a piece of scrap metal to the bottom of a speeder. With a growl of frustration and disgust with himself, he threw the torch down. Where in the galaxy had his mind gone? Why had he let it wander so thoughtlessly?

The sound of metal being ripped screeched in the air as Vader tore it off the scrap and threw it as hard as he could towards the opposite end of the hanger. A satisfying crash sounded as it hit the wall, but the satisfaction was short lived. He couldn't stay here and risk ruining anything else. If he was truly to get anything done, he needed a clear mind.

Looking down at the droid, who was beeping in concern at him, Vader shook his head. "No more for today," he snapped. "Find Threepio and have him escort you back to my wing."

The little droid asked if he was all right, but Vader didn't bother to answer. Of course he was! He just needed to get a certain woman out of his mind.

Stalking out of the hanger, the Sith decided to walk throughout the base. His long strides devoured hallway after hallway with alarming speed. Everyone cleared out of his way when he came near. A part of him was pleased with this. They feared him and he relished in their terror. And yet another part was saddened. Very saddened. Was he really so horrible that no one wanted to be near? Wasn't that what he wanted? Why wasn't he happy with it?

Senator Amidala had never shrunk back from his presence. Maybe that's why he'd been attracted to her. But she did now. He didn't miss the way she shivered when she thought he wasn't looking, or how she would no longer meet his gaze. That light that had been in her eyes before had been all but snuffed out, and it was because of him. A wave of anger filled the Sith at the thought. He wanted that light back! He wanted to see those eyes smolder at him again. He would much rather have the senator hate him than be afraid. Right?

He was about to check in on the intelligence department, when he froze. Up ahead, walking at a leisurely pace, was Senator Amidala and his personal assistant. They were talking calmly to one another, but that's not what upset him. What distressed him was the fact that they were walking arm in arm. They looked almost like a couple out for a Saturday stroll. They were even heading to the gardens.

Rage bubbled just below the surface as Vader watched them, hands clenched tightly into fists. The few pictures that hung in the hall were shaking. R2 had ended up following him instead of finding 3PO and he chirped in distress at being lifted into the air by the Force, but Vader didn't hear him. Instead his whole focus was of that conniving woman and his obviously brain-damaged assistant.

He was about to storm over and slice that stupid man into pieces and lock Amidala in her room, when he paused. This was good, right? He knew he had been getting too attached to her. The senator should mean nothing to him, and this was a good way to remember his teachings and let go. This woman meant nothing to him. She was just like all the others in her profession.

But he couldn't believe his own lie. He did care very much that she was with another man. He did have some sort of strange attachment to her. How could he not? They'd slept together for Force sake! And even though he hated to admit it, she was the only one that made him feel a little less lonely when they were together. She was the only one that had given him any amount of pleasure since he was a small child. The ache in his chest that had slowly been forming since he'd first met her would ease when he was with her.

And there was the fact that Lord Vader did not like to share. It could very well all be an innocent gesture and his personal assistant was merely showing good manners to a woman of her station by walking with her, but it didn't help how he felt. No, he had to make sure that the senator knew that she was his for as long as this deal was in place. Maybe it was time to revisit the terms of their agreement.

Striding over, the senator froze when he was still a good ten meters away even with her back turned. She could sense him. Further proof that there was something pulling them together. This was the will of the Force.

When his assistant caught on, he turned with wide eyes, before his face became neutral. With the senator still on his arm, he bowed to the Sith. "Good morning, Lord Vader."

"What are you doing with the senator?" No use toeing around the issue. He wanted answers and he wanted them now. This man was lucky he was kind enough to ask instead of just choking him.

Apparently the assistant realized how lucky he was too, as his green eyes widened. "The senator expressed a desire to see the gardens, my lord," he replied quickly. "I did not think it was an unreasonable request. Should I escort her back to your wing?"

Vader stared down at the tiny woman, but she wouldn't meet his eyes. Her face was in that insufferable mask she wore as a senator, but he supposed he should be glad it wasn't that eerie blank she'd had the first day after their sexual encounter. And while he should have her thrown back in her room, a part of him couldn't bring himself to have it done. "No," he said slowly, watching the senator's face closely for any sort of change. Her mouth twitched, but it went back into her mask quickly.

"Shall I continue to escort her to the gardens then, my lord?"

Rage filled the Sith at the inquiry, but he squashed it down. He couldn't kill this man. He was the first competent assistant he'd found in years. "No," he repeated firmly. "I will take the senator myself."

Finally the senator reacted. Staring up at him, brown eyes were blazing. There it was! That spark, that life! So much anger, yet it was dimmed with fear. Slowly she was becoming herself again. He would have to wait a little while longer before things became normal between them again, but this was a start. If it could go back to the way it was before, this was how it would begin.

Apparently showing around a woman when he could be doing work was so out of the norm as his assistant stared at the Sith as though he wanted to verify that he'd heard correctly, but ultimately thought better of it. Yes, truly this man was good. He had learned. Swiftly, he disentangled his arm from the senator's, bowed his head to her and then deeper to Vader with only a, "Very good, my lord," as he walked away.

Vader didn't bother to respond. His full attention was back on the woman who had once again averted her gaze. When the lieutenant was gone, the Sith hesitated. Should he say anything? He'd once learned proper protocol for entertaining women, but he'd never actually used it. He supposed he should offer his arm, as his assistant had, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. She despised him, and he didn't exactly want to touch her either. This was all still so new to him.

Instead he gestured forward with one hand, pointing in the direction they should go. Amidala scowled before storming off in the direction indicated. R2 rolled forward, leaving Vader to once again question his actions. He shouldn't be doing this, but the Force was whispering to him. He had to follow its counsel.

After a few minutes of walking, they came to the entrance of the garden. It wasn't the prettiest place he'd ever seen, and he was certain the senator thought the same. She came from such a beautiful green planet with fresh air and waterfalls. This little dome filled with a couple trees, shrubs, and flowers could hardly impress her, though it would anyone else on Coruscant. Oddly enough, however, despite being a poor representation of nature, she walked in, eyes closed and breathing deeply.

She must really miss her home planet. But that was good, right? It meant his plan was working...?

Together the pair walked the paths for a several minutes in silence, the senator in front while Vader allowed himself to trail after her, hands clasp firmly behind his back. He noticed R2 had opted to stay by the entrance. When they were far enough into the garden and there was no chance of anyone overhearing them, the senator spun around, eyes burning as she glared up at him. "What do you want?" she hissed.

It was good to see that fire back, but at the same time, it annoyed him. Crossing his arms over his chest, Vader glared down at her. "To ensure that my charge is not getting into trouble after she tricked my assistant into letting her wander about."

"I wasn't 'wandering,'" the senator posted her hands on her hips, only to wince, opting to cross her arms instead. Vader hadn't missed the pained expression. Was she hurt? "I just wanted to walk in the gardens."

Being a Sith Lord meant that one destroyed and gained power. It meant that he delighted in the suffering of others. But for reasons similar to what had gotten him into this confusing predicament with this woman in the first place, he didn't like the fact that she was hurt. It

didn't sit well with him. So instead of continuing his lecture or dragging her back to her room as punishment for her insolence, he took a step forward.

The senator immediately took several back. "What are you doing?" she asked, not completely successful in keeping the fear from her voice.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, gesturing to her hip. "What did you do?"

She appeared confused, then surprised before the anger was back. "I didn't do anything. It was you."

Vader scowled, trying to remember when he could have harmed her when his eyes widened and he felt his face grow hot. He hadn't blushed in years and suddenly he was finding himself embarrassed. Embarrassed and ashamed.

Looking down at his mechanical hand, he realized that he must have harmed her when he'd held her. There were times when he forgot about the strength in his prosthetic limb. He had no feeling in it, so it was hard to judge how much pressure he was applying. Although in normal circumstances he wouldn't have cared, he found he was angry with himself for causing this sort of injury.

It was not in a Sith's nature to do this, yet it wouldn't be the first time Vader had strayed outside the norm. He walked towards the senator, hand outstretched. She backed away, eyes wide in fear. She feared him, she hated him, these things should have been fine, but they weren't. He didn't want her fear, he didn't want her hate. Not anymore. He wanted something else, something that he had not had in over a decade, something he dared not name. He couldn't deny it anymore. The Force was screaming at him in affirmation.

Eventually she was backed into a tree and had nowhere to go. She tried to strike him, but he caught her hand in his mechanical one. Gently, he pulled it down by her side, and reached out with his organic hand once again. She tensed, but he ignored it. Spreading his hand over her hip, he watched as she winced. This was the spot. Closing his eyes, he reached out to the Force, to the weaker side, and focused all his energy on that one spot.

After staying that way for a few minutes, he pulled his hand away and stepped back, satisfied that it was healed. The senator was staring at him warily. "Do you wish to continue walking?" he asked, hoping to draw attention away from what he'd just done. Now that he had healed her, on some level he regretted it. Had he once again taken a step back in his training by doing this? He needed to get away from her, yet he didn't want to give her up.

She was obviously having trouble deciding what to do. She'd come out here for a reason, perhaps, like him, to think. He'd interrupted her peace, all because he'd felt jealous. It was unworthy of him. But he couldn't deny what he felt, at least not to himself.

He really was going insane.

"I want to walk around a little while longer," the senator spoke up.

Vader nodded. "Wander around if you must," he said snidely, before turning and walking towards the exit. If this is what she wanted, he didn't care, or that was what he told himself. He needed to get away also, to think. What was he doing? Was he really falling into this pathetic trap of weakness?

As he stood in the doorway next to R2, watching the senator mindlessly amble around, he couldn't stop from studying her. Her hair was thick and wavy and it shown in the sunlight. He wished he had this damned mask off so he could look at her without the tint of red.

Once more, R2 beeped in concern, but Vader hardly heard him.

Kriff. This woman was going to be the end of him.



## 13. Difference

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The Force was shifting, the ever tilting towards the Dark Side was tipping back towards the Light ever so slightly. Emperor Palpatine didn't like it. Something was happening, and he could only suspect that it had something to do with his apprentice.

There was much to admire about his young apprentice. Darth Vader was barely a score and yet was already a powerful Sith Lord. Almost too powerful. Had the boy not been in that accident, the Emperor wondered if he would have been killed by now. Vader was still so young and ambitious, he could have continued on with his previous momentum and destroyed his master years ago. But fortunately the boy's recklessness and the accident had tempered that ambition before it could truly manifest itself.

Still, the ambition was there. Sidious knew this. It was within all master-apprentice relationships of the Sith. Soon Vader would become impatient with his role as second of the Empire and would no doubt attempt to be rid of his master. It was what a Sith Master waited for with anxious anticipation. But not Sidious. He was not ready to give up his throne just yet, but he was not ready to lose Vader as his apprentice, either. One of them would have to die, and the Emperor detested both options. At least for now.

Thus far Vader had been a loyal servant. That was the natural effect when raising an apprentice from such a tender age in Sidious's experience. Vader didn't know any better. He'd been under his master's thumb so long it was hard for him to realistically see any other way of life. Just as Sidious had hoped. But that didn't mean the boy liked him. No, in fact, Palpatine knew of his apprentice's hatred for him. That was good. Hate made him strong. And yet, too strong.

Sidious had read an ancient manuscript long ago predicting the rise of Vader. A powerful Sith Lord that would destroy the entire Jedi Order. In his younger years, he had entertained the idea of being that Sith, of slaughtering the Jedi and laying waste to worlds. That was not where his talents lay, however. His gift was in manipulation and foreseeing the future. He certainly wasn't deficient in his fighting skills, but even he had to admit that his skills were lacking in comparison to the boy.

Darth Vader was a force to be reckoned with. The very air shook with his Force presence. Vader's presence was suffocating, his aura burned brightly with his talents in the Force just as his physical appearance dominated a room. There had never been such an incredibly powerful Force sensitive in history, or at least not that Sidious had found. The boy had been born of the Force. His power was expected.

Yes, Darth Vader was a powerful Sith Lord. He made the perfect apprentice. Young, powerful, and incredibly intelligent. It would be a waste if Vader decided to rise against him and Sidious would be forced to kill him. Just as it would be a waste if Vader killed him. As talented as his apprentice was, he was still young, still foolish and reckless. There was not a being in the galaxy that was as impatient as the boy. To rule a galaxy at such a young age could potentially have severe consequences. After a lifetime of working to bring the galaxy into the control of the Sith, it would be a waste if the boy lost it again to the Side of Light.

But thus far Vader had shown no interest in usurping his master. In fact, over the last several years, Sidious came to suspect that his apprentice felt secure and even complacent in his position. Complacency was not what the life of the Sith was about, but then again, it served the Emperor's purposes. He still had so many plans to set into motion and having to worry about an apprentice trying to destroy him would only get in the way.

But there was something whispering to Sidious that not all was well with his apprentice. Over the last several months he'd felt Vader's mood fluctuate in varying degrees. The boy's shields were very good, he could conceal much from his master, but the ripples in the Force could hardly be hidden. He knew Senator Amidala's presence had infuriated his apprentice, that the boy was eager to execute the woman, but he'd thought the boy had gotten over that and understood the need to keep her alive. And after his time on Bimmisaari, Vader had seemed well on his way to forever cementing himself in the Dark Side of the Force. But it hadn't lasted. Instead, coming back from Despayre, Vader had appeared... uninterested. Almost as though he no longer received pleasure from creating terror.

It was a sign. Something was changing within Vader. His loyal apprentice was planning something. It was the only explanation. The Force was telling him that something was happening. Indeed, he felt a tremor indicating that the balance he had created was off. What was Vader doing? The boy knew how weak the Light was, why was he not entrenching himself in the Darkness?

This wasn't the first time the boy had experimented with the Light. When he'd been younger, Vader had been quite good at healing himself. As part of his training, after Sidious would punish his apprentice, he refused to give medicine to the boy. The Sith way was gaining strength through suffering. A Sith's skills were not in healing, but destroying. It had taken quite a few punishments in order to instill that lesson into Vader when he'd been a child. Eventually, Vader learned that healing himself showed weakness and he hadn't done it again.

It had been ironically amusing that as soon as Vader had given up seeking that Light of healing that he had been grievously injured. The boy had only been seventeen at the time, and it was then that Sidious had become concerned that his apprentice would rise against him. Fortunately, Vader had been too reckless and impatient, and his injuries were the perfect excuse to damper the boy's ambition. Without focusing his energy on healing, it had been a good opportunity to inhibit him physically so that the elder Sith could keep up. Sidious firmly believed it had helped him and given him several more years to plan to be ready for the day his apprentice was ready to challenge his rule.

Was that what the boy was planning now? After all these years? Had his desire for more power finally caught up with him? Was this slight shift his attempt to heal himself, repair his body for when he would strike? This had to be monitored carefully. Even as he was, Vader could very well kill him. The boy was good. The Emperor would have to have some of his spies placed near Vader's wing as well as have them sabotage the medical droids that saw to him. This plan that Vader was hatching, it could not come to fruition. Sidious would see to that.

Padmé stood looking at herself in the mirror, wondering what had happened to Darth Vader. He was once again in his ignoring phase since their time together in the gardens, save for when he came to take her at night. Nothing had changed, except everything had.

Since her fateful walk about the gardens, the senator had become more inclined to think well of Vader— blasphemous though it was. But the Dark Lord of the Sith had done something that had gone above and beyond the realm of normal with him. He'd healed her. She wasn't sure how or why, but when he'd touched her hip that day, she'd felt a strange tingling sensation that was both cool and warm at the same time, before it had stopped. She'd wanted to ask him what it was, but he'd changed the subject, almost like he'd been embarrassed. He probably had been. It was only later that day when she'd come back to her room when she couldn't help but look at her injury again since Vader had touched her. Imagine her surprise when she'd lifted her dress to find the discoloration gone.

Why would Lord Vader heal her? He'd been gentle with her recently, too. Even though he was still cold towards her, he seemed to make a conscience effort in not crushing her hip with his hand anymore. That was uncharacteristically thoughtful of him.

Walking back to her bed, Padmé picked up her pad and opened the file "enigma." Maybe it was time to work on her list of Vader again. She'd been so distraught and angry since this whole thing started she hadn't bothered to record anything about the Sith. But she had learned a lot, and someday it really might be worth something to someone. Maybe in the end, this information would be all that stood between victory and defeat.

Laying back, Padmé thought through all that she knew about Vader now. She added humanoid to the list right away. He was at least compatible to her in that way, which meant that he was organic. Thus far she had no solid proof that he was cyborg, though he could understand the droid binary. His whole phobia with touching still applied. The only times he seemed all right with any form of touch was when he initiated it, whether it was for healing, dragging her away, or in sex. He had to make the first move or else it was not acceptable. She still had to wonder at that. Was this fear because of some traumatic experience, the simple fact that he hated touch, or was it due to his training, that he would automatically strike should he feel anything touch him? Or some twisted combination of the three?

There was also the fact that, although it was unlikely, Vader kept true to his word. Of course that could change, but thus far he had remained true... as far as she knew. If he lying to her, he was doing a damned good job of it. He also appeared to have a sense of fairness. It was obvious that he was harsh, but he also seemed fair in his own strange way, even generous when it came to her. He'd given her belongings back, everything that had been taken, including R2. And while the agreement had been made to trade an hour for an hour, Vader had only taken half an hour at the most, while not demanding she cut down her hour at all. Had he taken into account her emotional trauma?

That wasn't very likely. Vader was a Sith after all. Sith delighted in tormenting others. But if Vader really did, he hadn't shown it. If he really did like harming her, he wouldn't have healed her, would he?

Darth Vader was an enigma for the ages. He was some sort of oxymoron wrapped in deadly redundancy. He just plain didn't make sense. He was still exactly the same, yet so very

different. Even the air around him had changed, yet was still the same cold darkness she'd grown to recognize. What was Darth Vader, really?

Idly, she wondered if she should have put decent lover on the list. She snorted at the idea, as Vader certainly wasn't ideal. But even though she was still disgusted with herself for what she did every night, she couldn't help the small part of her that was... excited. Was this why Cotrilla kept sleeping around? Padmé worried that if she kept doing this she would become desensitized enough that she would no longer care. And what then? Would the rest of her moral base crumble as well? Is that what happened to Vader? Did he do things so terrible over and over until he just didn't care anymore? She shivered at the thought.

There was no way in the seven layers of Sith hell that Padmé would ever become like Vader. She wouldn't allow herself. Men like Vader and the Emperor had a weakness of character that when in the face of adversity, they crumbled and turned to darkness as an easy escape. It took so much more strength to continue on in the path of Light. Padmé had been raised right. She would not be twisted by evil, even if she had to continue to sacrifice herself.

But what sort of pressure had Vader faced that turned him towards the path of wickedness? For that matter, when had it happened? No one knew where Vader was from or anything remotely personal about him. For the first time, Padmé stopped and questioned how old Vader was. She'd never considered it before. Vader was just....Vader. He was ageless. There was no beginning or end for Lord Vader, not that anyone could see. He had suddenly appeared alongside the Emperor and not much else was thought about age. But for Padmé this was something intriguing. It was important.

How old was Vader? Thus far she hadn't thought about it. Who had she really given herself to? Suddenly all sorts of horrible images of some old, perverted, mutilated male entered her mind, a male that had agreed to this because he wanted sex. But with his stamina and agility in a fight, he couldn't be that old, right? His hesitancy in sex could mean anything from youthful inexperience to older, wiser learned caution. She wasn't allowed to see his face or any other part of him during the act, and she was always backwards, so she couldn't exactly make many judgements. Even if she could peek out through her blindfold to look down at his hands, they were left gloved.

His age made all of this seem suddenly more perverse and twisted. There was probably no chance that he was a good looking middle-aged man. No, he was likely an older cyborg male of some alien species that had a mutilated face and now had to wear a life support suit. She thanked the Force she'd been on contraceptives before all this to help keep her menstruation regular. It had entered her mind that she'd be using it for its intended purpose. At least not yet.

That was not something she wanted to think about. Darth Vader's child? It was too horrible to even try to entertain. It'd probably end up as some psychotic little bastard that inherited Vader's Force abilities and spent its entire life trying to kill her while its father went out unleashing terror in the galaxy.

STOP IT! Padmé grabbed her head desperately trying to get rid of the images of some little green baby that would end up stabbing her through the face with a lightsaber or eat her from the inside out. She couldn't keep up this line of thought or else she'd probably bring up the question of if she could ever love such a child. It would be hers, but also his...

It didn't matter. But it did make her think of her future family. If she could ever have one now. Somehow she didn't think that men would be impressed that she'd slept with Lord Vader. Especially in her culture and with the sort of men she hoped to attract. Being a former Queen of Naboo it would be taken as a hard blow should her people find out she'd sold herself like this. Young queens were the perfect, pure virgins, and even after their term, they were expect to remain chaste until their wedding night. Obviously that wouldn't happened for her.

So what sort of man would she end up with, if she got one at all? She hoped he would be kind and understanding, one with strong morals and values. One that was a firm believer in justice. She had always wanted a husband that was her partner in life, one that would support her just as she would him. A man that was not threatened by her fame or her independence. Someone that would be right there for her when she needed or wanted him. Someone humble but confident. And of course it wouldn't hurt if he was handsome and a great lover. Someone that could make her body sing the way...

"By the Force," Padmé sat up straight, horrified. Had she just been about to compare her future husband to Vader and hope that that future man would be as good as the Sith?! Hopefully the rebellion would find what they needed to destroy the Empire soon so she could get out of this mess and never have to think of Lord Vader ever again. She was clearly losing her mind.

But that was impossible. Vader had firmly branded himself in her mind. He was a permanent fixture, camping out in her frontal lobe. With her luck she'd probably live a long life and maintain a wonderful memory, and she'd never be able to forget the bastard. And when her future children or grandchildren asked about what she'd thought of Lord Vader, she would be forced to remember all of her time with him.

It didn't matter that Vader was good in bed. Padmé was confident that there was another man out there that would be able to please her the way Vader did. Better, even! She just had to believe that a tall, strong stranger would come sweep her up off her feet. She was being ridiculous, she knew, but she couldn't help indulge in the fantasy of some blond haired, blue eyed Prince Charming coming in a golden speeder to take her away. Yeah. Like that was ever going to happen.

It was only eleven thirty at night, which meant that Vader would be coming in another hour and a half. For whatever reason the Sith had designated one in the morning as their allotted time together. His reasons for this escaped her, but she didn't question it. Normally she'd try to get a little sleep before he came, but tonight her mind was too active.

Even though she was still revolted, she was angry with herself for the tiny, tiny feeling of excitement that he was coming tonight. She despised the man, she did. She hated everything he stood for and what he was, but damnit if the feelings he elicited from her during these sessions didn't drive her insane. It could be so much better, it really could, but for whatever reason she was fine with just this. What was wrong with her? She was like some sort of horny teenager!

With nothing else to do but wait for when Vader arrived, the holovid sounded like the only means to alleviate boredom. Switching it on, she flipped through the stations before realizing that there was nothing on. Even the news seemed to be having a slow night. Probably because

Vader hasn't been out that much recently, she mused. Usually the big stories happened several days after Vader came back from somewhere. The Man in Black made the headlines. Simple as that.

But with nothing else to distract her, she eventually settled on a corny soap opera re-run. It was at least ten years old or so, and she was amazed it was allowed to play with the new Imperial Censorships being set up. But then, it must be very cliché and tacky if the Empire found it as no threat. Which meant it wouldn't be all that interesting. Still, she watched. It was either watch *All my Larva* or think about Vader some more. No contest.

It was a testament to how lonely and bored she really was that she was watching this and getting into it. Padmé hadn't been sucked into something so corny and, quite frankly, bad since she was still a child. A child before her queen years at that. If she thought about it, the plot was extremely overdone and predictable, and the acting was terrible, but for whatever reason— probably because she was stressed and tired— it all seemed so unexpected. It allowed her an escape, something she didn't have to think too hard about, which was perfect.

A few episodes in, she was startled by the com. Instantly she dove for the controller, turning off the holo. The last thing she wanted was for Vader to know that she watched such crappy soaps, even if he probably already knew. She couldn't stand for him to see it as she wanted to save what little dignity she had left.

True to form the Sith didn't wait long before simply opening the door and entering. Padmé held back a sigh as she stood so as to kneel on the bed. She wondered why he preferred to do it this way. It was probably because he wished to keep this as impersonal as possible, and since he was so tall, he needed her to be elevated as well. Still, even with the bed being raised as it was, she wondered if he had to bend his knees a lot. A weird thought, but then, she was full of those lately.

When he saw that she was ready, he walked in, his stride noticeably slower, before he took out the blindfold and tied it around her head. It came as a surprise when the leather gloved hand brushed her hair from her face before he tied it. Again, she had to wonder at this man. What was Lord Vader? What was he really like?

With the blindfold secure, she noticed that he turned off the lights. Once they were off, she couldn't see a thing. Everything was black. The strange hissing from when he took off his helmet sounded followed by the clinks of his belt being undone. As always, gloved hands lift up her night gown soon after. Only instead of starting right away, jumping into action, Vader paused. Padmé face heated up as her bottom was left exposed, and she wondered if he was still struggling with his belt or if... was he... staring at her?

A shiver ran through her body at the thought, and once more she pictured some perverted old man not completely unlike the Emperor leering at her. But it wasn't the Emperor, it was just Vader. She tried to picture that Prince Charming again, but knew that no such man was touching her. There was a moment of hesitation before she felt him take her by the hips, pressing into her.

A hiss escaped her lips, as it always did, and he waited for her to adjust. Vader was a large man and it stood to reason that all parts of him were large in order to be proportional to his body. Padmé happened to be a petite woman, short and slim. It always took her a minute or so to adjust to having something invade her body like this. Surprisingly, Vader was always

patient in sex. Such an impatient man patiently waiting for her before he started to take his own pleasure. Bizarrely gallant of the man... even if he was taking advantage of her in the first place.

But when he sensed she was ready, he began his steady rhythm, rocking back and forth first, getting her ready, before he would inevitably lose control and want more. It was always the same, but that was fine with Padmé. She could handle this as long as it was predictable. She wasn't sure how she'd feel if he decided to get spontaneous in the bedroom. What would that even mean anyway?

But Padmé couldn't keep thinking about anything as all her attention turned to what was happening. Vader had picked up speed, become more aggressive. His hand had started to tighten around her hip, but he quickly eased up, as if remembering that he had hurt her several nights before. But at the moment, the senator couldn't have cared less. She wanted release just as badly as he did, and she had decided that perhaps she could come to terms with this situation better if she started thinking about this as using Vader just the same as he was using her. That made it sound a lot better in her head. She was using him for her pleasure. Not only men could do that. There were plenty of women out there that used men, why not her?

Trying to keep that in mind, Padmé decided that maybe she should try to enjoy herself as much as possible instead of beating herself up. It surprisingly wasn't that hard. There was still pain, but also so much pleasure. She only had to imagine that it was something else, that she was with someone else. It was easier to feel pleasure and not feel as guilty.

When it was starting to get faster and harder, finally Padmé allowed herself to let go, but Vader suddenly stopped. It was so unexpected the senator gasped. A whine escaped her lips before she could stop herself. It wasn't fair! She had been so close! What the hell was he doing? Was he trying to be cruel?

The harsh breathing behind her indicated that he had been close, too. Had he really finished before her? That had never happened before. Of all the cruel things, just when she'd decided to make the best of this!

Yet Vader didn't pull away, and he was still breathing harshly behind her. Was he finished or was this some sort of weird pause? She felt him shift and his breathing was muffled slightly by something. When she was getting too impatient, almost speaking up, something warm was placed on her neck, startling her.

It was his hand. His real hand. A flesh and blood hand and not some sort of weird tentacle or metal limb. He was touching her. A chill ran down Padmé's spine as she felt the rough, calloused fingers so very lightly stroke her skin. He was touching her. Really touching her. No gloves, no real reason for doing it. He'd wanted to touch her.

Padmé bit her lower lip to try to suppress any unwanted emotion from being revealed until later. Somehow, though, she knew that the dynamics of their relationship had once again shifted. They were entering into yet another unknown. She could feel his uncertainty, his want, it made her wonder if this was doing as much damage to him as it was to her.

But Vader was ever the tenacious man, and pushed the boundaries even further. He took up pace once more, which caused Padmé to groan. He picked up right where he left off, only this time, going farther. His hand, his real hand, slowly moved down from her neck, to her chest.

His hand was feather light, gentle, which was in such sharp contrast with the rest of him that was now slamming into her without pity. The difference was almost too much, causing a sensory overload. What sent her over the edge was when that calloused hand moved farther down to grab her breast.

What was happening here? She cried out her release, unable to stop herself from shaking, even as he kept going for several more strokes before grunting. They both slowed, panting, and when he withdrew his hands, she was dismayed by the loss of warmth. It seemed to take longer for both of them to recover.

When he finally did pull away, Padmé shakily lay down on the bed, trying to catch her breath, as she attempted to wrap her mind around what had happened tonight. Where things becoming more... personal? This wasn't supposed to happen.

She never got to think on it much more, as she fell asleep, not remembering if Vader made it out of the room before she did so or not.

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Obi-Wan sat looking over the communique that had been sent to him from Bail Organa. It was a list of planets that were to be investigated. Apparently Bail had gained a source that believed some, if not all of these places were of some importance to the Empire. Why that would be, Bail didn't know, nor did his source, but whoever gave this information felt it was vital.

Scrolling through the list, the Jedi frowned. Most of these planets were in the Outer Rim, many not even part of the Empire at all. Some of these planets he couldn't even remember anything about, so it was hard to guess what the Empire might be after on them. Maybe they were hiding something?

Like a secret battle station, perhaps? he thought as he saw the last piece of information gathered. It didn't surprise him in the least that there was some sort of secret project in the works, but he was concerned about the fact that they were covering it up by calling it an 'ore extractor'. Those were significantly large pieces of equipment that looked rather brutal. Granted, the Empire had a flare for creating large ships and bombers, but how large was this particular monstrosity going to be?

And what was more, where was Bail getting this information? Obi-Wan trusted the senator, but last time they'd talked, Bail had been worried more about Senator Amidala's rumored arrest and suspected betrayal. There had been no mention of a secret informant on the inside. The other man was passionate about his friends, maybe he'd simply not thought to mention it before. Or maybe... maybe Senator Amidala was the new informant?

While Obi-Wan usually stayed out of the Core and didn't bother watching the news feeds, he did remember Senator Amidala from when she'd been Queen of Naboo when he'd still been a padawan. It wasn't in Amidala's nature to betray. Her arrest must have been a sham that she'd managed to get out of mostly. She was notoriously good for weaseling out of such scrapes. But how in the galaxy had she gotten arrest only to then come out with information? He hadn't had much chance to speak to Bail in several months, only received this message with the secret information. It was time to talk again.



But while talking to Bail Organa weighed on his mind, it wasn't the only thing. He'd been monitoring the Force for a little over a week now, and detected minute changes. Tiny, almost unnoticeable flares towards the Light. Maybe he was imagining it, maybe not. Yet there was something telling the Jedi Knight that there was forces larger at work here than what met the eye. And the Force was telling him that it had something to do with Senator Amidala. He hoped she hadn't gotten into anything over her head.

In the meantime, however, he had to see to scouting out these planets.

## 14. Acquaintances

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There were times when Vader despised the fact that his ability for stealth was greatly lessened due to his hissing respirator and the glowing on his chest. He could do it, could go around without being seen, but that required quite a bit of concentration and the Force. Already Vader's mind was constantly split between keeping up his mental shields at all hours of the day and to move with relative grace in this blasted suit. Sure, he made it look easy, but it wasn't really. This suit was heavy, weighing him down at least seventy pounds. And add in the fact that he was almost constantly trying to read his surroundings and those around him...

Stealth was just a waste of energy in the end, so he had to improvise. But on missions such as this, it was hard. Impossible, really. And it was all because the Emperor was displeased with him.

A shrill laugh from somewhere in the room caught Vader's attention and ended his brooding. How he hated these gatherings. He looked out from his dark corner of the room to watch as all of Coruscant's rich and powerful mingling together in lavished wastefulness. They were disgusting, all of them. He could sense their selfishness and stupidity. They all put so much faith in their money and position. They knew nothing of true power or the supremacy of the Force. He wished he could kill all of them. It wouldn't be hard. He'd done it before when he'd killed the entire governing family at their gathering several years ago on Bestine IV.

But that was sadly not his job here tonight. Tonight he was here by the Emperor's command and to watch Senator Amidala as she mingled flawlessly among all of these sophisticated types. Normally when he attended such gatherings, he made sure to stand on the outskirts so as not to attract too much attention. It was hard though considering he was the only two meter tall man dressed in an all-black life support suit with a mask and a respirator. He didn't like the attention he received or the company that naturally flocked to him: brainless suck-ups that wanted to get in on his good side for when he was Emperor someday. Pathetic.

Ambitious Moff's would bring their daughters to meet him, power-hungry officers wanted to flatter him. He hated these people. They all only wanted to use him, to get something from him. His thoughts turned towards a certain senator.

While it was true Senator Amidala was using him, she wasn't exactly like the others. The others flattered him, she did not. The others wanted his wealth, she wanted none. And most of the women that were stupid enough to throw themselves at him wanted to become Empress one day. The very idea disgusted Senator Amidala. She wasn't like that at all.

Their relationship—if it could be described as such—was complicated at best. They didn't like each other, could hardly talk without one of them getting angry, and the awkwardness between them had manifested itself quickly ever since the first night that they had been together. But she was not using him the way other woman would like to, and she wasn't exactly afraid of him. She was, but she didn't let it control her. Her presence in his life was

upsetting and a major disruption... yet there was also some merit. Although he wasn't sure he could admit to anything particular just yet.

Tearing his eyes off the senator, he found his master in the center of the largest group. It was hard to miss his master. The Dark Side radiated so potently from the man that even the most Force dull individual would have to be brain dead to not sense him. He watched the older Sith for several minutes before he had to look away. He hated that man.

Traitorous thoughts about his master had risen in his mind over the past year, and he waited for the day when he could shed this suit and destroy the bastard and take his place as the rightful ruler of the galaxy. Then perhaps he could end all the pointless debates in the senate and crush the rebellion once and for all. There would finally be order and peace throughout the galaxy. He could make it so.

But the old man was acting strange, however, and it came as no surprise that the Emperor had probably caught on to him by now. His master would be expecting some huge elaborate plan, he always did, but that was not Vader's style. His master had kept him on such a short leash for so long, the old man didn't know his tactics when it came to planning. When out on military missions, Vader usually arranged big plots that tricked and manipulated events, just as his master would have suspected. But not for this plot. Oh no. It would be simple, and the Emperor would never see it coming.

But there was also the fear that his master was not suspicious about his plotting to overthrow him. Maybe Sidious caught on to the deal he'd made with the senator. That was a more horrifying thought. His master had lectured him on the dangers of the flesh, but it wasn't even that simple. He was willfully allowing the woman to pass information. He'd known that from the beginning that she was. What little she could have obtained, he knew she was passing it on. Why else would she be so desperate that she would sleep with him? It wasn't just from the mental stress.

Vader despised rebels, but they had their uses. His master had told him as much. So, when the time came, and Amidala's hope in the Rebel Alliance finally came through and launched some kind of attack, that's when Vader would strike. He would be ready. Even if there were Imperial losses, nothing the rebels could do could completely overthrow the Empire. Not with one little surprise victory. No, that was unrealistic. But one little surprise could cause momentary panic. One little surprise could cause men to forget about the dangers at home. But Vader would be ready for it. That's when Sidious would fall.

"You really don't like people, do you?"

The Sith turned to stare down at Senator Amidala. So, she tore herself away from all of the other sniveling ingrates that passed themselves off as politicians. Good. They were festering sores in the Empire. He was surprised, however, that she had willingly sought out his company. He would have thought she'd had enough.

"What do you want?" he asked, turning back to his inspection of the crowd.

He saw her frown out of the corner of his eye. "Nothing. Just to get away." She paused. "Your presence is a great deterrence for other people's attentions."

Curiosity got the better of him, and he looked down once more at the tiny woman. "I thought you wanted other people's attention. That's why we came up with a solution."

A blush found its way onto her cheeks, and Vader found his attention had sharpened. “Yes, well, there’s not many people here that I know and like,” she explained calmly. “Besides, I don’t like having the Emperor keep track of who I talk to.”

Vader crossed his arms. “He wouldn’t bother,” he said. “That’s why I’m here.”

“All the same,” the senator said, tracing the lip of her wine glass with her finger in an absent-minded sort of fashion. Her brown eyes scanned the room, a frown on her lips. It occurred to him that she didn’t want to be here anymore than he did.

So it was that they stood together at the edge of the party, neither one talking, just watching the others as they mingled and laughed. It was getting on in the evening, and more than one person had had more than enough to drink. The music had started up, and many couples were now going out on the dance floor for entertainment. Vader scowled under his mask. What a waste of time.

The senator, he noted however, was watching with an almost wistful expression. The wine was obviously getting to her. He was certain that she would never allow herself to look so pitiful otherwise, at least not around him. After a few minutes, she even started to nod her head back and forth with the music. Vader couldn’t help but watch the way her neck moved, even as he tried to remain focused on the events around him.

“Good evening, Lord Vader.”

The Sith turned and could have cursed when he saw Moff Fairfax coming towards them. “And Senator Amidala, what a delight.”

While Vader didn’t even acknowledge him, Amidala bowed her head slightly. “Moff Fairfax.”

“And what have you two found to discuss to keep company with yourselves?” he asked in a disgustingly amiable manner.

There were very few Moffs that Vader liked, and Fairfax was not among them. The middle aged man was an insufferable kiss ass to the Emperor—as most of them were—and didn’t try to hide his ambition. He was ruthlessly cunning in the political game and didn’t bother to have regrets. Admirable though that was, Vader didn’t trust him. Fairfax was smart enough not to cross him, but he certainly thought well of himself, even going as far as to believe he and Vader were on equal footing. That wasn’t true.

“That is none of your concern,” the Sith snapped, glaring at the shorter man. Height was always a bittersweet thing for him, but at the moment, he was delighted in the fact that he could make the older man look up to him and sense his fear. Height was good for intimidation, but annoying when trying to remain inconspicuous at parties.

Fairfax was apparently intelligent enough to be afraid, but Senator Amidala did not seem all that impressed. Instead, she smiled slightly at the Moff, even though Vader knew she didn’t like the man. “Just chatting,” she contradicted the Sith. It infuriated him. “And what of yourself, Moff Fairfax? Enjoying the party?”

How dare that woman write him off like that? He was not her dog to be dismissed! Because of her bold words, Fairfax was relaxing and seemed to regard him with less fear. That would not do.

“Just making my rounds, saying hello to everyone,” the Moff smiled happily. “Though I must confess I’d much rather be dancing.”

How much had Senator Amidala had to drink? She was nodding along with the other man easily and honestly admitted, “So would I. But not many men are free.”

The Moff’s eyes lit up, and the senator still seemed completely unaware of what she’d just done. Predictably, however, Fairfax smiled charmingly at the woman, bowing low to her. “I would be honored to have this dance, Senator Amidala.”

Finally she realized what she had done. She’d set herself up for this, and Vader could sense her panic. At last he was enjoying this party at last. She turned pleading eyes up to him, as though expecting him to refuse Fairfax’s offer on her behalf. He could even sense that she didn’t believe he would let her dance at all. How wrong she was.

“Well... I... I would hate to be rude towards Lord Vader by leaving him—”

“I do not require your presence, Senator.” It was enjoyable to see the look of betrayal that flashed in her dark eyes. What had happened to them? Had she really lost all sense of sanity if she expected him to protect her? Clearly the woman was mad. He was no savior.

Not waiting for another refusal, Fairfax took the senator by the arm and led her out towards the dance floor. The amusement only lasted for a minute before Vader realized that perhaps he’d been too hasty. Fairfax was not wasting any time to become cozy towards the petite woman, and even though Amidala seemed extremely uncomfortable, it did nothing to soothe the sudden flair of jealousy he felt. Despite not liking her, Amidala was his and no other man should be able to touch her like that. To touch her at all.

He was so fixed on watching the source of his anger, that he hadn’t noticed his master’s approach until he stepped next to him. “Your thoughts are elsewhere, Lord Vader,” Sidious said quietly. “What are you thinking of?”

“Why I agreed to let Senator Amidala indulge in pointless frivolity,” he responded truthfully. His master didn’t need to know the true sentiments behind why he was so upset.

“I was wondering the same thing myself,” the Emperor turned sickly yellow eyes up towards him. “Your duty was to break her, Lord Vader.”

“And she will be, my master,” Vader replied quickly. He had to be careful about how he did this. He had no desire to be punished by his master. Not again. “She does not like Fairfax. She did not want to dance with him. It was amusing to see her angry.”

The Emperor looked at him doubtfully, before nodding. “She has a very strong will. She will need more than being forced to dance with a man she doesn’t like.” He paused. “I want you to start invading her mind.”

“Master?”

Sidious was thoughtful a moment before he lowered his voice. “Slowly invade her mind. Perhaps she will break faster.”

“I thought she had use to you in the future, Master?” Vader asked. “If I were to enter her mind, she would likely go insane.”

The thought was strangely horrifying to the Sith. He didn't like the woman, but she had her own uses to him. He didn't want her to suddenly just crack and become a breathing vegetable. Vader only interrogated beings when it was clear they were going to be killed anyway and were of no further use. He was the last resort, the heavy hitter. Should he do this, he would likely harm her mind beyond repair. For whatever reason, he didn't like the thought of doing it, even beyond just wanting to keep his plan in action. Something deep within Vader realized that he didn't want to lose her, or at least her personality.

But Sidious seemed oblivious to such thoughts, which was good for Vader. Instead, his master was sneering up at him as if he were stupid. Nothing new, but the younger man couldn't wait to wipe that look off his master's face forever. Soon. Soon.

"I don't want you to rip her mind apart. I want you to slowly work your way in so she will be unable to detect you. Can you do this, Lord Vader, or must I start looking for another apprentice?"

Rage boiled just below the surface of the young Sith. All around him, people started to move farther away from him, feeling the cold hatred radiating off of him. He had to control himself enough so that things wouldn't start floating around and smashing into people—even though that would have been amusing as much as satisfying. He didn't even know why he allowed himself to be goaded by his master like this anymore. Habit, he supposed.

It was not hard to get Vader riled up, but extremely difficult to get him to calm down again. Not much could assuage his temper, so not many beings lived to tell the tale once they'd crossed him. But just when he thought he'd lose himself and stab his master through the throat, his thoughts unexpectedly turned towards something... softer. His eye was caught by Senator Amidala with Fairfax, her long, navy dress twirling about her. For a moment, he saw nothing else except the woman who was the cause for this recent debate. But then he couldn't help notice how graceful she was, how beautiful, and remembering how lovely she was without that navy dress too.

Taking a deep breath, Vader released it silently before turning his attention back towards his master. "It will be as you have said, Master," he replied respectfully.

Sidious's eyes narrowed, but he eventually nodded. "Very well then. I expect to hear back from you in several days' time with promising information."

Vader bowed his head respectfully before turning his attention back to Amidala. It could not be denied that she was lovely. There was something so graceful about her, so elegant. It was a pity that her mind would eventually be crushed by him, but perhaps satisfying as well. He was getting tired of her sass, but at the same time, she was interesting. She was the only person that would challenge him, save his master. But it had to be done. It would be harder now that his master was becoming suspicious, but it was nothing he couldn't handle. He just hoped that he could hide his jealousy from his master, even though it was hard not to go over there and rip Fairfax's heart out through his throat.

When the dance was over, the senator quickly excused herself before all but running towards the opposite side of the room. She ended up with Bail Organa, who seemed stiff around her. Not surprising. He knew Vader was watching him as well. But still, the two talked and Vader was mildly amused to see the other man offer Amidala another drink. The woman took it quickly and drank it within seconds. What had Fairfax talked to her about?

The party continued to grow less and less interesting as far as Vader was concerned. The Emperor soon left him, and some of the guests became increasingly inebriated. No one else came near him, however, which was good. A success in his book. And when it was nearly twelve-thirty, he decided it was time to go.

Weaving his way through the still surprisingly crowded room, Vader followed the presence of Light to find the senator. She was sitting at a table slumped over, talking to Bail, who looked close to panic. When the other man saw the Sith, that panic doubled. “L-Lord Vader!” he stammered as he stood.

Senator Amidala, however, turned around in her seat to glare up at the Sith Lord. “Where the hell’ve you been?” she slurred. It took Vader a moment to realize she was drunk. She was really drunk. Not once since meeting the woman had he thought this was possible.

Organa quickly jumped up and moved around the other side of the table to help Amidala as she tried to stand. “I’m so sorry for her, my lord,” the senator mumbled. “She must have had one too many—”

“I know how alcohol works, Senator Organa,” Vader snapped. He still couldn’t believe Amidala had done this to herself.

“Yes, well,” Organa trailed off awkwardly. “Maybe I should just take her home—”

“I will take her home.”

The older man paused, looking uncomfortable. “I—”

“I don’ wanna go home,” the short woman burst in, still leaning heavily on her friend. “I wanna go home.”

That made no sense to Vader, so instead of debating with a drunkard, he grabbed her by the upper arm, pulling her away from Senator Organa. “We’re leaving now,” he stated flatly.

Of course her motor function was impaired and she tripped over herself until she fell into his chest. Both men stiffened for different reasons, while Amidala looked up with a grin on her face. She even giggled. “Whoops!” she laughed. “Didn’t mean t’ touch ya. I know how much ya hate feelings... sometimes.” Did she just wink at him?

Any color in Organa’s face drained away into nothing as his friend continued to laugh. Vader didn’t find it amusing. At all. Especially with what she was implying. It wasn’t really noticeable to anyone, but he’d rather not take that chance. Without another word, he pushed her back before grabbing her arm again and dragging her away. He had to get her out of here before she really said something they’d both regret.

But as she began to protest, loudly, Vader realized a new tactic would have to be implemented. They were drawing attention to themselves, and he didn’t want that. “Senator,” he growled so that no one could hear them. “Stop this foolishness and walk.”

“I could if you weren’t running,” she glared right back with unfocused anger, over emphasizing her words. “Besides, yer making me trip. A real gentleman would offer a lady his arm.”

“I am not a gentle man, Senator,” he hissed.

Infuriatingly enough, she was laughing again. “That, yer not,” she smirked. “So maybe you go find one, an’ I’ll go home with him!”

Any good feelings he’d had towards the woman before evaporated. She was getting on his last nerve. And here he’d thought it’d be a shame to have to rip her mind apart. It was not a shame, but a delight. She really was like everyone else. Weak and stupid. She was certainly not what everyone had said she was.

It wasn’t worth arguing, though. Drunkards tended not to listen to anyone or anything except when they wanted. She was obviously not in the mood to listen to anything he had to say. So, instead of arguing, he grabbed her hand and put it in his arm as he had seen his personal aid do. That seemed to confuse the woman, but more importantly, it shut her up. And so, lessening his stride, he walked with the inebriated senator stumbling beside him.

They finally made it to his speeder, and he was finding he regretted taking one of his sportier models to this instead of the standard Imperial speeder. It would be a terrible if his precious RGC-16 ended up with vomit all over it. Maybe he’d have to drive slower... just this once. It was either that or ruin his newest model. He hadn’t even modified it to his exact specifications yet.

For a moment he feared she wouldn’t be able to stand on her own without his support, let alone open her door on her own. Pathetic. But he didn’t really want to lean over and peel her off the ground if she fell over. So, he leaned her carefully against the speeder and opened the door for her, all the while she was humming something. It sounded old, and it was horribly out of tune. Gritting his teeth, Vader grabbed her arm. Once again, she fell into his chest, giggling, as she peered up into his masked face. Her eyes sparkled in the night light of Coruscant. She was smiling up at him, oddly earnest and trusting. Something stirred within his breast as he stared at her.

The spell that came over him didn’t hold, however. He refused to let it. He felt suddenly panicked and ended up shoving her into the passenger seat. He slammed the door shut, not noticing that a bit of her dress had been closed in it. The senator started giggling again, but he was too angry and flustered to take notice.

Instead, he jumped into the driver seat. He was about to take off when he noticed that the senator wasn’t buckled in. In her current state, she could likely fall out before he even got back to base. She was completely out of it. How much had she had to drink?

So, leaning over, he used the Force to grab the belt, before fastening her securely in. As he tried to straighten up, the senator grabbed his hand. He tried to pull away, but her grip was surprisingly strong. He watched her stare at it for a long moment, her features becoming strangely serious. She studied it carefully before pulling at his glove. Instantly, he jerked his hand back before taking off, making sure to keep both hands on the steering.

As they drove, the senator leaned over the edge of the door, looking down at the traffic below. “Stop that!” Vader snapped, torn between looking at her and the traffic in front of him.

Amidala didn’t move for a moment, and he began to fear that she’d passed out, before she sat up for a moment. “You’re not fun,” she pouted, before leaning back over.

The Emperor said that the senator had to be alive, so alive was how Vader was going to keep her. Reaching over, he grabbed her by her shoulder and roughly pushed her back into the



seat. Maybe he should add extra safety straps when he modified the speeder. It would be easier to keep drunks in at least.

“You’re so mean!” she whined as she slumped down in her seat. “Why are you so mean?”

“So I don’t have to put up with idiots like you,” he roared. ‘How could you have been stupid enough to get drunk?’ His nerves were about shot. He wasn’t cut out to babysit anything. “You’re staying with your enemy, but you would lower your guard down like this?”

Big brown eyes suddenly looked at him with a sad, but penetrating gaze. They were suddenly very focused, and it unnerved the Sith more than he cared to admit. She suddenly didn’t seem so inebriated. “You’re not my enemy,” she said seriously. “Are you? I thought we were friends... or something...”

Why in all the galaxy had the Force placed him with this woman? There was something aggravatingly moving about her. Her sad words nearly made him feel guilty. Nearly. But still, she raised a good question. What were they? They were lovers, yet neither loved the other. They weren’t friends, but he had to admit, they weren’t enemies in the conventional sense anymore. Maybe they were just as she said, maybe they were just somethings.

Although he had promised himself not to talk to drunks, she had a surprising effect on him. “No,” he relented quietly. “Not enemies, Senator.”

A beautiful smile lit up the senators face and the Force sang in the Light. Vader turned away. “Don’ call me that,” she demanded suddenly. “We’re not enemies so tha’ must mean we’re acquaintances, so we call each other by our first names, Darth.”

There were so many things wrong with what she said he couldn’t find it in himself to correct her. Instead, he decided to watch the traffic. Even this late at night it was still busy. Coruscant was the planet that never slept, after all. It certainly lived up to its reputation. But as he carefully drove with traffic—for once— he couldn’t help but realize that this was the perfect time to invade the senator’s mind. This had to be slow, and he had feared she would detect the initial connection, but not if she was drunk. She probably wouldn’t remember any probing of her mind. He could take advantage of this moment. But after what they had just talked about he felt a little...

No. Darth Vader was a Sith Lord. He should not feel anything at all. Reaching out with his mind, he focused on the senator and latched on to her signature. She was staring up at the sky now, and didn’t seem to notice him. Carefully, he linked a small part of his mind with hers. He could very likely get a lot of information out of her right now, but he didn’t. He didn’t know why he didn’t want to, but he didn’t. He blamed it on being tired.

“Why do you wear tha’ mask?” the senator asked. No, Padmé, he thought sarcastically. They were acquaintances after all. “Can’t you breathe?”

He didn’t bother to answer.

“Are you some sort of evil alien from some outer region bent on conquerin’ the galaxy?”

“Yes.”

“And did you burn yourself or get injured real bad, so that’s why you have the suit, or is it ’cause you can’t breathe oxygen for long?”

“Yes.”

“Are you really some bald, old ugly man?” she squinted at him, as though it would help her see through his mask.

“The ugliest,” he replied casually.

He almost smirked when he heard her sigh dramatically. “I knew it,” she pouted. “But at least you’re pretty good at the whole sex thing.”

Vader’s eyes grew wide in astonishment. It had been an unspoken rule between them that they never talk about what they did at night. Ever. He was already cursing his master for making him link his mind with hers. “Senator,” he began, intent on correcting her crudeness, but she interrupted him.

“Padmé!” she yelled, eyes angry. “My name’s Padmé, Darth!”

“Don’t call me that!” he snapped, pulling into the hanger. Thank the Force they were back! “Now get out!”

Of course she scowled at him, but it was largely ineffective. It took her several minutes to try and figure out how to open the door, but she would never know success, because Vader became so impatient he ended up having to open her door again and pull her out. Again, she stumbled, but Vader held her by her shoulders so she wouldn’t fall into him. He didn’t want that repeat again.

Padmé quickly linked her arm in his, and the mighty Sith Lord nearly sighed. People like this he either killed or Force choked into unconsciousness. He didn’t think he could do that now. So instead, he allowed her to lean most of her weight on him as they went—though there really wasn’t that much weight on her.

It was a long, torturous journey back to his wing, as the senator insisted on humming again. It was lucky that there was only skeleton shift on duty, so only a few people saw the indignity of the Senator of Naboo and the unusual toleration of the Lord of the Sith. Vader made mental note to destroy recordings of this from security cams as well as threatening any of the personnel that would like to spread rumors. His reputation had to be maintained.

And so, eventually they made it to her room. Technically, he had let her off his leash and let her talk to friends almost all evening. Technically he had been scheduled to take her tonight. When he saw her stumble into the bed and flop over, however, he found he wasn’t really in the mood. Lately he’d been wondering if sex was addictive, but he was relieved, at least, to know now that he wasn’t attracted to everything about her.

He was turning away when he heard the senator mumble something. Again, he nearly sighed, but turned back to the woman whose face was buried in her pillow. When he was standing over her, he scooped her head under his palm and flipped her face over so that she could at least breathe, or he thought she could through that tangled hair. “What?” he asked, his voice coming out surprisingly soft.

“Are you gunna leave me?” she mumbled.

“Yes,” he said evenly. “It’s time for sleep.”

She groaned, but didn’t bother to open her eyes. “Am I drunk?”

“Yes.”

She was silent a moment, before she finally looked up at him with red, blood shot eyes. “Do you think we can be friends?”

Her voice was so weak, so quiet, it startled him. Something pulled at his chest, and for the first time in many years, a sigh finally escaped. “Perhaps, Senator.”

“Padmé,” she mumbled, turning away from him, her breathing eventually evening out, signifying sleep.

Vader watched her a moment, and before thinking better of it, he took off his glove, the one she’d been examining, and petted her thick hair, brushing it out of her face in hopes that she could breathe easier. “Perhaps, Padmé. Perhaps,” he mumbled, before shoving his glove back on and stalking out of the room.

After sending 3PO to watch over her through the night, Vader sat in his hyperbaric chamber contemplating on what he should do about Senator Amidala. And hoping that there was some way he could survive all this mess.

## 15. Hangover

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Hell was real and Padmé was certain she'd found it. Bright, unforgiving light was being shown in her face, and her head felt like it was going to explode. Her mouth felt completely dry and her tongue felt like she'd eaten sand. There was a heavy layer of disgust that had settled over her, and she felt sticky and unclean.

All in all, she felt like shit.

After counting to ten, she managed to open her eyes and lift her head, only to find that her hair was tangled in her face. Force, her head felt like it weighed a million tons! It was almost too much to keep it lifted, but she forced herself to keep it up. She could just see over the bed, and realized that the trash bin was right next to her bed, and there was plastic covering the floor all around her.

Kriff, she was hung over. Which meant that she'd been drinking last night, which meant... "Kriff," she muttered as she sat up and rushed to the 'fresher. She threw up for a good five minutes before she felt herself calm enough to get her head out of the toilet. When she did, she was startled to see 3PO and R2 next to her.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" the protocol droid bemoaned. "Here you are, my lady." He handed her a cup of water.

Padmé was all too grateful for it and carefully swigged it around in her mouth before spitting it out. The taste of vomit was not one of her favorite things, and it almost made her gag again, but she felt surprisingly good now that she'd gotten sick. Good enough, at least, to realize that she was in her nightgown, which meant...

"Kriff," she whimpered. Had she changed out of her dress from the previous night or had... had Vader done this? No, it couldn't have been him. He wasn't patient enough to deal with a drunk person. But how did she get into her nightgown?

She remembered all too clearly their deal. Even though it had been a Friday night, Vader had said he'd allow her to mingle with her friends and such, so she had to fulfill her end of the bargain. It had been upsetting, especially since they seemed to have engaged in their... relation far too often for her taste, but then, she wanted to appear like she was happy at the party. She'd drunk one glass of wine when she'd first got there, nursing it for about an hour, before she took another, not really sipping it all that much.

Since she was such a petite woman, she knew her limits, and decided not to indulge in much more. She'd already felt warm and relaxed when she'd gone to stand by Vader towards the middle of the evening, and she'd promised herself to stop. But then there was Fairfax, a man she greatly despised, and Vader had made her dance with him, and then Fairfax had been so crude and disgusting and... and...

And that's when she'd run to Bail and decided that a few more drinks wouldn't kill her. She was without a doubt a kriffing idiot. Why in hell had she thought drinking would help solve her distress? She knew her limit, but she'd disregarded it, even when she'd been aware

of the signs that she was slipping into inebriation. And why? Because that bastard Fairfax had been so lewd and started threatening her and...

But that wasn't an excuse for what she'd let herself do. Restraint was power, and she'd never allowed herself to become intoxicated at a public function before. Her image meant too much. But the stress of everything seemed to have caught up to her, and having her mind always full of Vader was enough to cause anyone turn to the bottle, right? She was only making excuses, of course, but everyone had to indulge in it sometimes.

She didn't remember anything past going to Bail. There were a few flashes of memories—or she thought they were memories—of Vader coming to her, of driving in the speeder, looking at the stars, but nothing else. She tried to work out what had happened, but couldn't. It was clear Vader had gotten her home, but what had he done to her when they got back?

Sex with the Dark Lord was fine when she was aware of it. It'd even stopped feeling like rape some time ago. But this? She was not at all comfortable with the idea of sleeping with him while drunk, and even worse, not remembering anything. What if he'd done something really terrible to her?

"My lady," 3PO interrupted her panic attack. "Here, take more of this."

The senator looked up and took the white pills that the droid offered and swallowed them down with a mouthful of water. "What was that?" she asked, her voice thick and scratchy.

"The medicine Artoo found for you last night," the droid explained. "Don't worry, it said you could take them every couple of hours." R2 beeped in confirmation.

"I took some last night?"

"Oh, yes, my lady," 3PO answered. "We gave them to you several times throughout the course of the night. Artoo said that this was supposed to help with the nausea and help to rehydrate your body."

Padmé looked from one droid to the other, before nodding. Her head did feel a lot better now, and since she'd gotten sick, she was starting to feel all right. It was obviously some sort of hangover medicine... but how or why R2 knew about it and how he had gotten it was beyond her. She was just thankful that she was feeling pretty okay, if still a little sick. It was probably a lot better than if she hadn't taken the medicine at all.

"Did I get sick last night?" she asked.

"Oh yes. Several times," 3PO said with pity in his voice. "The first time you threw up all down your dress!" Padmé winced at the thought. "Artoo had it sent to the laundry at once, and I took the liberty of changing you into your nightgown."

So, it had been the droids. A huge weight had been lifted off her chest at the announcement. But that didn't mean Vader couldn't have taken advantage of her. Biting her lip, Padmé decided that there was nothing she could do about it at the moment. Instead, she might as well try and get ready for the day. First thing was first. "I'm going to take a shower," she announced, standing up carefully.

"Certainly," 3PO nodded his head. "I'll go get something for you to change into."

“Please make sure it’s something light,” she called after him, before staring at R2 who had yet to leave. The droid whistled at her, and it sounded oddly accusing. It caused the senator to sigh. “You can yell at me after my shower. Now can you please leave?”

R2 was clearly not happy about being dismissed just yet, but turned to roll out. He beeped something back at her, to which 3PO exclaimed in indignation. “How rude! Artoo, you really ought to mind your manners!”

Padmé shut the door on their bickering, her head starting to throb again. Why did she have to have a hangover? Why did she have to drink so much last night?

She started the shower and waited a moment for it to warm up. Once it was ready, she quickly stripped and stepped into the spray of water, sighing. Her stomach was starting to churn again, but her head had decided to settle into a dull thumping, which she could tolerate. It had been years since she’d gotten drunk. The last and only other time had been was after she’d turned eighteen. She’d cleared her schedule for anything the following day, taking a sort of mini-vacation, and had decided to stay up and experiment a bit. It was a rather stupid experiment, but she’d wondered what being drunk felt like. She’d drank before, but she’d never been drunk.

Needless to say, after that, she’d decided she never needed to drink that much again. She’d been so sick the next morning she’d stayed in bed for the entire afternoon, only coming out that night. The experience had been so scarring, she couldn’t touch alcohol for several weeks after. It had just been lucky that Dormé had been with her and taken care of her. Somehow, the other woman had handled her liquor better.

But now she’d broken her promise to herself and had gotten drunk. And for no real reason! She really was going crazy. What Vader must have thought of her! If she knew him, and she’d like to think she was getting to know him better than most, he’d probably been disgusted with her lack of self-control. He might have even found it amusing in some way or other that the great Senator Amidala had let herself go like this. How could she be so stupid?!

After grabbing her towel and drying herself off, she stepped out of the shower to find that 3PO had laid out everything that she would need. Sometimes the droid was a little over the top and worried too much, but he certainly knew how to take care of a person. He was almost motherly. Again, she had to wonder how such a droid came into the care of Lord Vader.

When she was dressed, she quickly brushed her teeth before she walked out of the ‘fresher to go cool off and comb out her hair on the bed. She felt a lot more human now that she’d showered, but she still wasn’t one hundred percent. It would probably be nighttime before she felt like herself again. Which reminded her, what time was it?

“Thirteen hundred?!” she exclaimed in shock when she looked at the clock. She’d slept the whole day away! That was it. She was never doing something so stupid like last night again. Never.

Groaning, she worked at her hair, wondering what sort of things could have happened while she was incapacitated. What sort of things could Vader have done while she was completely out of it? The thought made her angry and scared. Angry at herself and him for taking advantage of her, and afraid of what could have happened to her. She could have very nearly ended up dead.

“Artoo?” she called, her voice still sounding rough to her ears. “Artoo, did you hear me come in last night?”

The little droid chirped a positive sound, and 3PO translated. “He says he did, my lady.”

Biting at her bottom lip, Padmé decided that even though she felt sick to think about it, she had to know. “Can you tell me what happened?”

The astromech began chirping and rocking back and forth before 3PO once more translated. “He says he recorded it because he wasn’t sure what had happened to you at first.”

Padmé smiled slightly. “Artoo, you’re brilliant,” she said sincerely. “Can you play it?”

The little droid rolled forward and began to play the holo. Padmé winced when she saw herself stumbling next to Lord Vader, her arm in his, but he was basically supporting all her weight. It was with the utmost embarrassment that the senator had to watch herself as she basically fell into her bed face first. Vader’s image stood over her a minute, before surprisingly, he turned to leave. He hadn’t touched her! But a noise that apparently emanated from her stopped him.

Once more, Vader stalked over to her, and from the angle, it was clear R2 had been on the opposite side of the room, so Padmé didn’t see what happened too clearly, but she was pretty sure he moved her head. “What?” the image asked quietly, kneeling down beside the bed.

“Are you gonna leave me?”

“Yes. It’s time for sleep.”

Her image groaned. “Am I drunk?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think we can be friends?” Padmé’s jaw dropped at hearing her drunken self ask such a thing. What in the galaxy had she been thinking? How drunk had she really gotten?

If her question had surprised her, Vader’s response floored her. After a brief hesitation, he answered, “Perhaps, Senator.”

“Padmé.”

There was another pause before he answered, “Perhaps, Padmé. Perhaps.”

By this time, Padmé was shaking her head. What on Coruscant had she been talking about? She’d made Vader call her by her first name? Her first name was very special to her, something that not many people got to called her. Why had she made Vader call her that?

Her eyes remained fixed on the holo, however, and she saw the Sith hesitate over her, and she knew he was doing something, but couldn’t tell from the angle. The image of her hair moved... had he touched it? And suddenly, the Dark Lord stood, looking as though he were pushing back down his glove, before he stormed out of the room. She had clearly passed out since then, but she wasn’t concerned about anything else at the moment.

Darth Vader had been... gentle with her. No, that couldn’t be, could it? He was certainly not what anyone would call the caring type. Just the thought of it blew her mind. He’d helped her to her bed, he hadn’t taken advantage of her, he’d stayed when she’d spoken to him,

he'd... touched her hair without his glove, it looked like. What the Force was going on? This was not the Vader she knew and hated. It would have made sense for him to just come in, dump her off and leave. In fact, he'd almost done just that, but the fact that he'd stayed, for even just a minute...

The image of 3PO startled her as R2 was still playing the recording. "My lady," he came shuffling in. "Lord Vader asked me to tend you... Oh dear!"

And finally the recording stopped. He hadn't dumped her off, he'd sent someone probably better qualified than himself to tend her. What was she supposed to think of him now? He was certainly still the same monster that committed war crimes and destroyed peoples and devastated planets!... Yet he was gentle with her. He was lenient with her. He'd healed her. There was much more to the Sith than he would have anyone believe, Padmé knew that. But what was she supposed to think of her captor now?

She didn't have to wait long, because at that moment, her door burst open, and the Sith in question was standing just on the other side. The moment she saw him, Padmé knew he was mad. No, he wasn't just mad, he was seething. The room's temperature seemed to drop several degrees, and she could only stare up at him with conflicting emotions. How was she supposed to respond to this man that had been so tender with her?

"Come with me," he snapped, his voice so drastically different than the soft tones he'd used the night before. He didn't even wait for her to respond, but spun around and walked out of sight.

Padmé was left momentarily speechless, before she found herself up and stumbling after him. She didn't even have on shoes, so she hoped they weren't going to walk around the entire base. Luckily, however, he'd only wished to take her to one of the conference rooms. It was the same room that he'd been in when she'd proposed that they become lovers. It didn't exactly bring about the best memories.

It was cold in the room, but Vader didn't seem to notice, even as Padmé wrapped her arms about herself. Instead, he sat down and pointed at a chair next to him without a word. Apprehensively, she did as she was bid, and sat next to him. It was much worse to be so close to him, as she could feel his anger more acutely than ever before.

But he didn't start lecturing her. Instead, he turned on the holo feed for the news. Padmé frowned in confusion before the reporter turned to a new story. "In other news," the anchorwoman smiled, "There is officially a new celebrity couple out in the galaxy."

Why in the galaxy was Vader making her watch this gossip? Surely he wasn't in to that! He hated people, why would he care who was dating who? She got her answer when a picture of herself and Vader flashed on the holo. She paled instantly.

"Last night at a social gathering for Coruscants rich and powerful, Lord Darth Vader and Senator Amidala of Naboo were seen together throughout the evening." The picture changed to one of them talking before the dancing had begun. 'Several sources claimed that the two had come to the party together, and were seen leaving together also.' Now there was a picture of her leaning on Vader's arm, smiling. She obviously had to be drunk there, but in the picture, it just looked like she was smiling, while Vader was escorting her out. "Neither Lord Vader or the Senator have been available to confirm or deny their new relationship, but if you



ask me, a holo is worth a thousand unsaid words,” the anchor smiled. “And it looks to me that there may be an Empress for this Empire in the future.”

There were no words to describe the horror that Padmé felt at that moment. She turned wide eyes to Vader, but he didn’t reply. Instead, he turned the channel and a well-known gossip show was now playing. “—and Senator Amidala! Can you believe it?” the woman on the screen exclaimed. “Never once in a million years did any of us think that any woman would catch Lord Vader, but then, out of nowhere, Senator Amidala snags the most eligible bachelor in the galaxy! Did anyone see this coming? I admit I did. I always knew that—”

Vader turned the channel. “—other news, it seems that there is a new couple in Coruscant. Lord Darth Vader, the Emperor’s heir to the throne, was seen last night at a social gathering escorting Senator Amidala of Naboo. There has not been any confirmation on if the two are an official couple or not, but those interviewed last evening seem to think that there’s a good chance that there is something going on between the two.”

At this, Vader turned off the holo and turned his masked gaze towards her. She could feel his glare even though she couldn’t see it. It burned. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” he asked, his voice quiet, but sharp and deadly.

“I... I don’t...”

“I’ve spent half the morning trying to get this filth off the air!” he snarled, standing up, his chair nearly falling over backwards.

“I’m sorry—”

“No you’re not!” he roared. “I’ve spent all morning going from station to station to personally end this, only to be called away by the Emperor himself! Do you have any idea how long it took me to explain this mess to him? To sooth his suspicion?”

“But we’re not a couple—”

“We’re close enough, Senator, and you know it!”

Padmé froze, tears in her eyes at his yelling. He was right, and that’s what made it worse. They weren’t exactly a couple, but they were sleeping together. The Emperor had assigned Vader to watch out for her and spy, not have sex. But what would it matter? Vader could always just tell Palpatine that he was torturing her. He could very easily get away with this... Unless, for some reason, the Emperor didn’t want Vader to touch her in any manner.

“I’m sorry,” she said again, staring down at her lap, trying not to let the tears fall. Her head was pounding, and she still felt terrible. Being put on the holo did nothing for her at the moment. And to feel Vader’s anger so acutely pointed at her, it was all beginning to be too much. It seemed that she just kept making that one mistake, one tiny misstep in one way or another, and her entire life was turned upside down. Why did this have to happen to her? Wasn’t it someone else’s turn for bad luck by now?

The air remained cold, but somehow Padmé knew Vader was trying to calm himself. This affected him just as much, if not more, after all. Vader was not one that made it on the news for anything less than a report of victory or for the praise of a battle. Darth Vader had just as much stock in his image as she did. Whoever had come up with these outrageous reports had

probably put their life on the line for including the Dark Lord. She just hoped no one died because of her stupidity.

“Why did you drink last night?”

The sudden question took her by surprise and it took a moment for her to reply. “I don’t know,” she muttered.

“You had a reason,” Vader hissed, leaning forward on the table getting closer to her. “You were fine before your dance, but you had two immediate after. What did Fairfax say to you?”

“Why do you even want to know?” she demanded, taking her anger at herself out on him. “You’re the one that made me dance with him!”

“I did nothing!” he snarled. “You could have refused him!”

The frustration of the whole ordeal finally got the best of her, and Padmé stood up, glaring at the Sith. “No I couldn’t!” she cried. “It would’ve been rude and I didn’t have a good reason not to! You know nothing of social protocol!”

“Apparently you don’t either if you allow yourself to get drunk at a party,” Vader sneered.

“Only because Fairfax was being a nerfherder!”

“What did he say?”

“He kept telling me how beautiful I was and how much he wanted to bed me, all right?!” she cried, unable to stand it anymore. She already felt like crap, she didn’t want to remember this right now. Vader remained silent. “He was just so creepy and lewd and... and... he kept watching me, even when I walked away. I ran to Bail because I thought another man would keep him away.”

The respirator hissed between them for several moments before Vader finally spoke up. “Why didn’t you return to me?” His voice was a lot gentler.

“Because the Emperor was with you,” she sighed, suddenly furious with the old man. “I didn’t want to have to talk to him.”

Slowly, the aggressive posture that Vader had adopted relaxed until he was simply standing. He seemed to be thinking about something, and Padmé would have dearly liked to know what it was. “In the future,” he began, “you will stay around me. If anyone makes unwanted advances towards you, you will find me directly.”

“Won’t that just exacerbate rumors that we’re... a couple?” That word tasted foreign on her tongue.

“That cannot be helped now,” the Sith said simply. “We will go about our lives as before. If the media harasses you, make no comment and inform me immediately. I will take care of them.”

That didn’t sound like a very good thing. “No one will die if I tell you, will they?”

Vader chose not to answer. “As for now,” he continued, “I have work to do. Should anyone ask you at work about these rumors, do not answer them. CT-585 has been ordered to guard

you more strictly should anyone come to harass you. He will now be stationed directly outside your office door to keep an eye on you at all times.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Padmé argued.

“You didn’t prove that to me last night,” he snapped. “Now get out. I have run behind my schedule for the day while trying to sort out this mess.”

Padmé turned to leave, before she stopped, remembering. “I’m sorry,” she repeated softly. “I truly am... But thank you.”

The Sith’s masked face snapped up to stare at her. His head cocked ever so slightly to the right, as if confused. “For what?”

Did he really not understand? Or was he trying to make her admit to something? “For helping me last night.” She felt suddenly shy and looked down at the floor. “For being patient and not taking advantage of me when I was vulnerable.”

He stiffened in a way that Padmé suddenly realized meant he was uncomfortable. She didn’t know why she could read him just a little bit better now, but she could. He was uncomfortable with gratitude, with emotions, with feelings. It was a known fact that Vader could come up with a battle strategy within seconds, but throw feelings at him and the man seemed completely unable to adapt. Truly Darth Vader was the strangest creature she’d ever met.

But to save face, the man turned away, sitting down and looking as though he were trying to act busy. “I had no desire to get vomited on,” he growled.

Even though she was taken back at first, Padmé realized he wasn’t good at accepting thanks or praise. He only knew how to criticize and be sarcastic and dry. In his own crude way, this was Vader speak for, ‘don’t mention it.’ Though the senator suspected that he would’ve agreed with her version and want her to never speak of this again.

“All the same,” she trailed off for a moment. “Will I... see you tonight?”

“Get out, Senator,” he almost sounded tired.

Deciding not to push her luck, Padmé walked out of the conference room and made her way back to her room to lay down and rest for a while and hopefully get rid of her headache. As she lay down, she couldn’t help but wonder, certainly not for the first time, what Darth Vader was.

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When the Amidala had gone, Vader slumped forward in his seat and took several deep breaths, trying to reign in the pain. Before he’d been so angry he hadn’t felt it much, but now it was catching up to him. He had to get back to his hyperbaric chamber to heal. He was actually more than a little surprised that he was still conscious. Funny how sustaining fury and stubbornness made a man.

Standing up slowly, Vader strode out of the room and towards his chamber like nothing had happened. He didn’t want the senator to suddenly come out and realize he was sagging or supporting himself up against a wall. That would not do.

When he made it to his chambers, he made sure to keep walking at his brisk pace until he finally was able to collapse in his chair in the chamber. He sat still for a moment, just breathing, before he was able to take off his mask and helmet. Once that was done, he very carefully took off his cape and started to peel off his life support suit. He ought to call the medical droid, but he didn't want to. He felt terrible, and Force lightning was always worse due to his prosthetic arm and the respirator controls, but lucky for him, his master didn't want him dead. Yet.

After struggling for a few minutes, he eventually gave up when he only managed to get his top half free. It felt wonderful to be free of the blasted thing and he knew it was going to be hard to get back in again. It always was. He felt so trapped, it took all of his will not to just run back to the palace and challenge the Emperor right now. Patience, he was reminded yet again. Patience would win the day. He just had to be patient.

His master had tortured him for disobedience. Sidious had been worried by the news reports of his and Senator Amidala's apparent relationship. True, Vader was disobeying his master by his sexual encounters with the woman, but it was the principal of the thing. The Emperor really believed the tabloids over him? Really? Vader was nothing if not loyal. Practically his whole life was centered around the bastard, yet he was abused this way.

It had been difficult to assure his master that there was nothing going on between him and the senator. But when his master had eventually listened, the elder Sith was apparently pleased with the turn of events. It gave them both very good credit and popularity with the population around the galaxy. To see the Empire's lead enforcer who fought for the safety of the galaxy going out with the Empire's most outspoken senator who fought for the rights of beings everywhere looked good. Very good. It was looked like a major political merger, like making peace with the Old Republic. The Emperor had demanded Vader stop contradicting reports, but hadn't said Vader had to encourage them. Which he wouldn't.

But even after all that, after he'd killed a few reporters and the fool who had been stalking them and taking pictures last night, after making threats all morning, his master was angry with him not for any of that, but for the possibility that he might want to ensure real relations with the senator. Of course that was stupid... as far as the old Sith could tell. Vader had to, very awkwardly, assure his master that even if he'd wanted a physical relation, he couldn't because he was in the life support suit. The only thing Vader could figure out was that his master had actually forgotten that small bit of information and in his embarrassment took his anger out on his apprentice. Like always. That's when the Force lightning had come.

Closing his eyes, Vader decided that he needed to take a few days off. This whole mess with the senator was getting a little out of hand. He had to look like he was in a relationship with her while he wasn't, but secretly was. What the hell had happened to his life? One minute he's a powerful Sith Lord whose sole purpose in life was to dominate and destroy, the next, he was having to tiptoe around everything and play some political game. He hated it.

But a part of him wasn't so sure he'd change this even if he could. Being with Senator Amidala... with Padmé...well, it felt good. And not just the sex. Sure, he was angry with her more often than not, but there were times, especially when he was away from her, that he wished he could just stay with her. He thought about her constantly, and couldn't help the slight warmth at the thought of her. He'd forgotten what warmth felt like. It had been so long

since he'd felt any pleasure and warm hands touching him, or the warmth of twin suns on his skin...

Sighing, the young man decided he should probably just rest for a while. It had been a long, terrible day and it was only fourteen hundred. Without realizing it, his mind stretched along the thin connection he had with the senator. He could feel her relaxed and realized she was sleeping. He could invade her mind, but he didn't want to. Not yet. Right now, he too would rest, wishing he could touch her soft hair again.

## 16. Allies

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There were days when Obi-Wan really just wished he could be a little more Sith-like and damn the consequences of his actions. There were times he wished he could scream and yell and throw a temper tantrum of tremendous proportions. But he couldn't do that. Jedi training was so ingrained into his brain that he couldn't bring himself to go against the calming techniques that always seemed to kick in at the most inopportune times, always right when he wanted to just lose himself in frustration. It was a good thing, but exasperating as well.

Gazing around the filthy cantina that he found himself in this week, he tried to remain calm, even as two men were still fighting and knocking into everything, including Obi-Wan. How he would like to just pull them apart and slap them for being drunken fools, but he couldn't do that. He couldn't even pull them apart and help them settle their differences. He couldn't let anyone know he was a skill negotiator or they might catch on that he was a Jedi. Jedi, after all, were not the galaxies most favorite group at the moment.

Standing up when the fighting started to get more intense, Obi-Wan pushed his way through the crowd, away from the brawl and its spectators, to sit at the bar. He missed wearing his Jedi garb, and he wasn't sure he'd ever fully get used to the close fitting trouser or the simple white shirt he'd managed to obtain. He looked more like some sort of trader than a Jedi Knight, but then, that was the point, wasn't it? He even wore a blaster at his hip, his lightsaber hidden in his leather jacket. To the outside world, he was just another ordinary man.

Sitting at the bar, he ordered another glass of water. The bartender looked at him as though he were crazy, before filling the request. The former Jedi knew it looked strange to be drinking only water at a bar, but he'd never been able to consume alcohol. The Jedi had preached against it so fervently that even now, three years after their fall, and when he should be fitting in as completely as possible, he couldn't do it. He was sure other Jedi had done it, but he just couldn't. It wasn't him.

A busty old Zeltron sat at the other end of the bar and kept winking at him. Obi-Wan tried not to make eye contact, but between her red skin and blue hair, she kept drawing his attention from the corner of his eye. Blast his fantastic peripheral vision! The last thing he wanted was for her to make her way over here and shoot pheromones at him. He shivered just at the thought of it. Maybe this wasn't a good idea...

"Hey handsome."

Definitely not a good idea. "Oh, uh, hello," he gave a brief smile, not wanting her to think he was attracted or anything. Not to say she was ugly! She just looked to be about twenty-years older than him, and he was a Jedi, physical relations were right out with him, and there was the fact that he didn't know this woman, and... And you're rambling to yourself. Good going, Kenobi, Obi-Wan mentally berated himself.

The Zeltron came and leaned up next to him, smiling as prettily as she still could at him. It was clear she'd seen better days. "What's a good lookin' guy like you sittin' here all alone

and with only a water?”

He had to think fast or this could potentially get out of control. And he certainly didn't want to let on that he had any sort of Force powers. “Oh, you know,” he gave a nervous laugh. “A lot of guys come in here with money...”

Thank the Force that that seemed to do it! The woman's lip curled with disgust and she turned and left without another word. Women in these places only seemed interested in money, and since Obi-Wan really didn't have that much, he was safe. Well, at least they left him alone when they found out.

Sighing, he leaned forward on the bar, thinking. He'd tried to get into contract with Master Yoda and the other surviving Jedi weeks ago, but thus far he'd been unsuccessful. Not surprising. They were all deep in hiding, and communication on the worlds they'd chosen were not the best. But still, Obi-Wan wished he could talk to the masters still left about his dream. If only he had someone with him. Anyone! It was getting quiet lonely here by himself. He was so used to be around other Jedi that this lone-wolf lifestyle he'd been leading the past few years was wearing him down. He'd always had the other Jedi at the temple, or his master, or his apprentice...

Obi-Wan closed his eyes against the pain. Poor Kalin. If only she'd heard him. It had taken him hours to find her body while staying out of the troopers' sights. By the time he'd found her, she was almost unrecognizable with all of the blaster wounds and scraps from falling off the cliff side. So young to have lost her life. Only fifteen. Still Obi-Wan grieved for her, just as he grieved for all the Jedi who had fallen to Order 66 as well as to Darth Vader. Even now, he still could not understand how anyone could have done this. It just didn't make sense. It went against nature!

But it was in the past, and he had to do all that was in his power to help restore the Jedi Order if he could, or at least help bring down the Empire. Thus far in his searching of planets that Bail had sent to him, Obi-Wan had found very little. But he had to check out entire planets, so the going was slow. But he would do what it took to help. It was all he could do now.

He couldn't stand to be among so many other people and yet be so alone. Standing, the former Jedi paid his minimal tab, before walking out of the cantina. In the morning he would leave here and begin a search on Geonosis. A part of him never wanted to go back there again, but if Bail thought it might be worth investigating, then maybe it was. Maybe the Empire was using the old Separatist headquarters there? Had the Separatists left something valuable there? Only time would tell.

Back at his fighter on the outskirts of town, Obi-Wan decided to make camp and began settling down for the night. Just as he was about to close his eyes, he heard someone. Someone that he had not heard in ten years.

“Obi-Wan?”

Blue-gray eyes snapped open, and the Jedi Knight was searching the darkness wildly. “Master?” he called tentatively. No, no, this could not be. Qui-Gon Jinn had died ten years ago! His old master could not be here!

“I am here, Obi-Wan,” came the unmistakably soothing voice of the former Jedi Master.

The young man blinked his eyes several times, trying to wrap his mind around what was happening. "This cannot be," he muttered to himself. "Master Qui-Gon died."

"Yes, I died, Obi-Wan, but that doesn't mean that I am gone."

Obi-Wan jumped at the words. "Wh-where are you, Master?" he called, standing up. "I can't see you... Am I going insane?"

The air around him seemed to warm up just the way it always had when Qui-Gon would smile. It caused a fierce ache and longing to fill Obi-Wan. "No, you're not insane. Not yet, my young apprentice."

"How is this possible?" the living Jedi asked, sitting down hard upon the ground. "You're supposed to be dead, Master. How is it that I can hear you?"

"The Force is a very powerful thing, Padawan. Did I not always tell you to believe in the Living Force?"

"Yes," the Knight was nodding his head, feeling awed and slightly dismayed at what was happening. He still wasn't exactly sure what was happening.

"Don't you remember the Jedi Mantra? Death, yet the Force?"

Obi-Wan frowned. "That's the old mantra," he said. "It was 'there is no death, there is the Force'."

Again, the air warmed, and he could image his master smiling at him. "And yet the older mantra is the truer mantra." The younger man's frown deepened. "There is death, Obi-Wan. I died. But there is still the Force, and there will always be the Force. The Force is capable of any and everything. The new mantra is more constricting, more limited. The elder ones knew what they were saying: Emotion, yet peace. Ignorance, yet knowledge. Passion, yet serenity. Chaos, yet harmony. Death, yet the Force. Learn this, Obi-Wan."

Immediately the Knight was nodding his head, as though he were just a padawan again. "Yes, Master. But Master... why did you come to me? I... I still don't understand all this."

"You will in time, Padawan." Qui-Gon reassured. "I have learned much since my death and have struggled to find the path back to the world of the living so that I might help you and guide you."

Wonder filled the Jedi Knight and he felt his emotions rising to the point where they almost threatened to overtake him. "All this time... I miss you, Master," he admitted with tears in his eyes. "I miss everyone. They were all... brutally slaughtered, and I feel so alone, that I can't—"

"Not alone, Obi-Wan," the warmth enveloped the young Jedi and for just a moment he knew peace. He'd been by himself so long with minimal contact, he'd almost forgotten what this felt like, this warm connection to the Force. The pureness. Everything had been shrouded in Darkness for so long.

"I am with you, Padawan. I never stopped being with you. Just as the Jedi from all ages have never stopped being with you."



This comfort felt so good. He'd been beating himself up for so long, feeling so guilty that he'd survived when others had not. It was a relief, and it made him feel so tired and old. "Is... is Kalin there too?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell her... tell her I'm so sorry," Obi-Wan broke down. "I let her down! I should have been able to protect her. I should have been able to protect you! I should have been able to do something, should have been able to stop the Sith from taking over—"

"No, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon soothed. "This was the will of the Force. The events that happened were foretold long ago. There was nothing you could have done to stop it. And as for Kalin, she knows. She knows and does not blame you. You did all you could. Just as you did by my side while I walked the earth with you."

"Then is there any hope?" he cried, even as a tremendous weight felt as though it had been lifted from his chest at knowing neither his former master nor padawan blamed him. "If this was all predicted, is there any hope that this Darkness can be lifted?"

"There is one. The Chosen One."

The Chosen One? That was just some sort of myth... wasn't it? Obi-Wan had grown up with stories of the legendary being that would bring balance to the Force. But they had just been that. Stories. Stories that had always seemed so unrealistic to him that he'd just dismissed them as a cultural part of the Jedi Order. There had never been any evidence to support that there would be a Chosen One, never mind that he had entered into the world!

"But, Master," Obi-Wan began. "I don't understand. If the Chosen One is real, why didn't they stop all this from happening? Why didn't they destroy the Sith before all this destruction?"

The warmth around him seemed to take on a melancholy quality to it, and immediately Obi-Wan was upset that he'd saddened his master. "Unfortunately, Obi-Wan, this is how it was meant to be. Passion drove events into destruction, but passion is what will drive events into balance once again."

"I don't understand."

"In time you will, Padawan. But until then, look for the Chosen One. He will need your help."

Eagerly, Obi-Wan nodded. "Of course, Master! I will fight by his side and help him in his quest to restore balance to the galaxy!"

"He will need much more than that, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said seriously. "He will need you to train him."

All excitement that had been building up in the Knight was brutally knocked out of him at his master's words. "Train him? Me?! Master, I can't train the Chosen One! I'm not even a Jedi Master! I couldn't even see my first padawan to the trials. Wouldn't Master Yoda be so much better than me? He is the greatest of all the Jedi. He—"

"Would be quite unable to guide the Chosen One," the other stated firmly. "The Chosen One will need someone young and flexible to train him. Someone that will have complete

compassion. Someone who will teach him the true mantra of the Force, and guide him in his struggles.” Obi-Wan remained silent.

“Destroying the Emperor will not be difficult. The challenge will be to illuminate Darth Vader. It is Vader who you will have to help him in fully defeating. He cannot do it alone.”

A chill ran through the Knight at the thought of the black monster that had been unleashed on the Jedi Temple. The same beast that had destroyed races and laid waste to planets. Darth Vader was an animal, one that would not go down easily. Even though it frightened him, Obi-Wan already knew that he would help the Chosen One in his mission to defeat the Dark Lord of the Sith. “I will, Master,” he stated firmly. “I promise.”

“Be mindful of all that I have taught you,” Qui-Gon continued. “Be mindful of the Living Force. Remember, not all is as it seems. Already there are those setting up Vader for failure.”

“I will remember, Master.”

The warmth around Obi-Wan did not lessen, but he felt his master’s presence fading away. “I will be with you, Obi-Wan. Always.”

And with that, the young Jedi knew that his master was gone and would not be speaking to him again. But he wasn’t gone. None of his friends were really gone, even if they were. He suddenly realized that Qui-Gon had been right. There was chaos, yet harmony if one looked for it. There might be death, yet through the Force, there was still life. The mantras he had learned as a youngling were so detached, so unrealistic that it was a wonder he hadn’t realized this before. The old mantras at least took into account that bad or negative things happened, but also realized that there was still good to be found, hope in an otherwise bleak situation.

Maybe he could do this. Maybe his master had been right and he was supposed to help the Chosen One. Maybe that’s why the Force was ever so slightly shifting? Was the Chosen One beginning to realize his power and stepping forward in attempt to defeat the Sith? The Force sang in a positive manner, and it gave Obi-Wan hope. A hope that he hadn’t felt in a long, long time.

Laying back down on his sleeping roll, the young man smiled up at the stars, still surrounded with the hope and warmth of peace that his master had given him. Maybe things were looking up. Maybe things would get better.

He just wondered when the Chosen One would appear, and who he was.

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Darth Vader knew that Senator Amidala was nervous about going back to work that Monday, but he also knew he didn’t really care. This was her own fault, let her stew in the knowledge that this dread was because of her. He wasn’t nervous for the day, he’d already faced the Emperor, but he was becoming extremely angry. Just the thought of his inferiors sharing looks, some idiots perhaps even asking him about rumors was enough to send him in a simmering rage. He made mental note that the next social gathering that he was sure they would be obliged to attend, to ban the senator from drinking.

Even before they landed on the pad at the senate, Vader could already see that there was a congregation of people waiting for them. Damn those news reporters! Where they really so

stupid? He'd killed several people yesterday, but they still insisted on badgering him? Idiots. All of them.

When he set down the speeder, he got out and went around the other side to help out the senator when he realized she had no intention of getting out. He ignored the reporters as they shouted out questions or other things to gain his attention. When he opened senator's door, he stared down at her. Brown eyes were silently pleading up at him. Once more she was beseeching him to help her, to save her from all this. Once more he couldn't understand why she would turn to him for some sort of hero. It defied logic, it made him feel... uncomfortable.

Not wanting to wait for her to screw up her courage, Vader grabbed her by the wrist and helped her out, making sure to block everyone else's view, lest there be rumors of an abusive relationship. That would be all he needed. His master would be most displeased.

When she was finally standing on her own feet, finally the courageous Senator Amidala was back. Her expressive face was gone and her mask of indifference and regal was back in place. Vader was finding he hated that expression. He liked it better when she was angry or when they were together in a more intimate manner. But he couldn't think of that right now. Right now, he had to concentrate on the moment.

"Senator Amidala! Lord Vader!" several reporters were calling, pushing their recording droids forward. "A moment of your time?"

Neither responded, even as CT-585 emerged from the speeder. They couldn't move when they turned fully around, because the reporters had formed a barrier around them. What little restraint Vader had, was quickly becoming frayed. They kept asking so many questions, all of them personal and intrusive, at last, his temper got the better of him, despite what his master had said.

Almost instantly, the Force responded to his feelings, and the droids recording were all suddenly crushed or simply blew up. Next to him, the senator jumped while the reporters screamed. Not wasting any time, Vader strode away, with the senator in tow. Behind them, the trooper raised his blaster at the fretting reporters, who were torn between wanting to follow their story and running away for fear of the Sith Lord. They were all so stupid. Smart people would have run by now.

When they made it inside, they small group marched to the Naboo suite and didn't pause, even as they received looks and glares from others in the building. Next to him, Amidala was uneasy with the attention. She didn't show it on her face, but he could sense that she was. The link he'd formed with her mind clearly betrayed her to him. He didn't have to wonder at her regret for the other evening, but he also knew it wouldn't help them. She should let go of the regret, as it served no purpose. But then, even he knew that it was better said than done.

When they made it to the suite, Vader paused and stopped the trooper as well. The senator looked back, confused, but Vader pointer for her to go into the office. She frowned at him, before thankfully doing as he requested. When she was gone, the Sith turned his full attention to the other man.

"I want you to stay with the senator at all times today," he stated. "At lunch, do not leave her side as you have been lately. She is not to be pestered with mindless questions."

“Yes, Sir!” the trooper straightened up in attention, baring his blaster up straight.

“Should anyone harass her, you have my permission to get rid of them however you see fit. Shooting is permitted, but only under the most extreme circumstances. It would be of no great loss, however, if death were to occur.”

“Yes, Sir!”

Vader paused a moment, not liking having to leave. The situation with the senator was still difficult, but he had work he had to see to, and he couldn’t afford to put it off anymore. He was so far behind, and the Empire wasn’t going to run itself. And so, without another word, he walked away. He just hoped that the crazy girl wouldn’t get into any more trouble. She had a knack for that sort of thing.

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By the time lunch rolled around, Padmé wasn’t sure she wanted to leave her office. She’d worked diligently all morning, but it was hard when even her staff was looking at her strangely, some of them like she’d deceived them. Of course this looked bad. Very bad. Her only hope was that the Alliance wouldn’t think she’d betrayed them again, since Bail knew she’d really been drunk.

But when the clock struck noon, Cory came into her office, blaster in hand. “Lunch time, Senator,” he stated simply.

Sighing, Padmé knew she had to go. This wasn’t just a break for her, it was for him as well. She didn’t want him to have to go hungry just because she wanted to hide away in her office. That wasn’t the sort of person she was anyway. Padmé Naberrie Amidala didn’t run from her problems... at least for long. It was time to go.

Standing up, she made her way around her desk and out the door. The stares she would receive would be terrible, but then, she had endured worse. She just hoped that no one would point and whisper as they had when they’d found out about Cotrilla... though no one knew that she and Vader were sleeping together. As far as anyone else knew, she and Vader were only recently a couple and recent couples didn’t engage in that.

The long walk to the cafeteria was silent, and the moment they entered the room, everyone stopped talking almost as one. Every eye was suddenly on Padmé and she found her face heating up with embarrassment. But she would not let them get the better of her. No, she held her head high as she walked in and through the line, Cory not leaving her side for a moment. When they finally took their seat, she couldn’t help but feel relieved. It was like she had actually accomplished something.

When she was about to start eating, she noticed Cory still standing at attention over her. His blaster was actually trained on people who came too close. “Uh... Cory, why aren’t you sitting and eating with me?”

The trooper didn’t answer a moment. “Lord Vader gave me specific orders, Senator. I must watch you closely.”

“You can still sit down and eat lunch while doing it,” she said with a small smile. “Sit down with me.”

Cory hesitated. “Lord Vader—”

“Sit down,” she ordered.

It took only a few seconds before finally, the Storm Trooper did as he was bid. He sat ridged in his seat. Still unsatisfied, wanting her friend back so she could ignore the stares and whispers direct at her, she tore her sandwich in half and held out one piece towards him. After a pause, the trooper finally took off his helmet and set it aside before taking the offering.

“Thanks,” he said, smiling before he took a bite. “I didn’t know senators would share their food with troopers?” he raised an eyebrow playfully, once again morphing into someone that Padmé could actually like instead of the cold mechanical instrument he was with the helmet... Much like a certain Dark Lord she could think of.

“Please,” she rolled her eyes, ignoring the fact that he chewed with his mouth full. “You ought to know me better by now.”

“I thought I did,” he nodded. “But that was before I heard about you dating Lord Vader.” He grinned.

Padmé tried to stop the sour expression that came to her features at the mention of the Sith. “You don’t honestly believe all that crap, do you?” she asked, disappointed that even the diehard Imperials were getting into this. This was obviously worse than she’d previously thought. Which was very bad.

“I dunno,” Cory shrugged a shoulder, looking down at her chips thoughtfully. She pushed her tray in the middle of the table and he helped himself. “Those pictures of the two of you looked pretty real to me.”

Damn whoever had taken those stupid holos! “It was just a party,” she said. “I had wine. That’s it. We’re not a couple.”

Cory nodded in understanding, but his face betrayed his disappointment. It surprised Padmé. “What, you wanted us to be a couple?” she asked, shocked.

“I’m not saying anything,” the trooper defended, looking at her drink, which she handed over. “I just thought it wouldn’t be such a bad thing if you were, is all.” He began slurping up her juice.

“How in the galaxy would it not ‘be such a bad thing’?” she demanded. “We’re two totally different people. You know that.”

Again, the trooper shrugged a shoulder. “Not so different.” She glared at him, crossing her arms over her chest. He smirked, but went on. “You both are good to troopers and treat us like people. That’s more than anyone else has done for us.”

“So what, we’d just be some sort of celebrity couple that could talk to troopers?” she raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, but it’d also be nice for when Lord Vader becomes Emperor.” Now he made a grab for the cake, tearing a piece off for himself. “It’d be nice to know that us troopers would get taken care of and have an Emperor and Empress that cared about everyone. Even us clones.”

Just hearing others talking about her being some sort of Empress chilled Padmé to the bone. It went against everything she believed in. How could she ever be an Empress to an Empire that oppressed and enslaved others? She believed in democracy! In a Republic! Not some sort of dictatorship. And the thought of being married to such a cold, vicious killer... it was like some sort of nightmare.

"While I see your point," she said as gently as possible, "I'm not Empress material."

Now it was Cory's turn to look at her skeptically, as he leaned sideways on one elbow, staring over at her. "Really? You think that? You were queen of an entire planet when you were a kid," he replied dryly. "I think that qualifies you to be an Empress, more than anyone else."

"It's not that simple," she shook her head, trying to deny that there was anything going on between her and Vader. She truly wished there wasn't so she didn't feel so trapped. "And besides, this is all moot anyway since we're not a couple and I don't intend to be."

After a moment, Cory finally backed down, nodding as he handed her back her drink. Looking down, she realized that he'd eaten half of everything. That was fine, though. She wasn't feeling particularly hungry anyway. What Cory had said to her made her feel a little sick even. Was this what everyone else thought too? Were they all expecting her to marry Vader and be some sort of Empress?

"So what is with you and Lord Vader anyway?" the trooper asked, unable to keep silent on the subject.

"He's just my guardian because of the rebels, you know that," she sighed. "He just went with me to the party and took my home. Same as always."

"Then what's with all those pictures of you smiling at him all dreamy-like, huh?" Cory goaded.

Padmé was sure her eye was twitching by now. "You're too nosy for your own good, Cory," she growled, pointing a vicious finger at him.

Unfortunately, her attempt to intimidate him failed as he started laughing. It did nothing for Padmé's mood. When he'd settled down, she raised an expected eyebrow at him, crossing her arms over her chest again. It caused the trooper to chuckle again. "Sorry, Lady Vader," he teased. Her scowl turned black. "Didn't mean to upset you, but... well," he gestured to her. "You certainly picked up Lord Vader's mannerisms."

Realizing what she'd done, Padmé quickly dropped her arms and stared at the trooper with wide eyes. By the Force, when the hell had she started to mimic Vader? The thought was disturbing. She didn't want to be anything like him! But then, he did have a few not-so-bad qualities to him, if she could admit it.

"You're a jerk," she pouted, shaking her head and realizing that she'd lost.

Cory smirked at her, before reaching for his helmet. "Heard that one before," he smirked. "Comes with the job. But I'll still get invited to the wedding, right?"

"Of course," she replied drily. "You and all the other troopers."

To Padmé's surprise, Cory winked at her before shoving the helmet back on his head. Shaking her head, she took another bite of her sandwich before deciding she really didn't feel like eating. Her appetite had been off since getting so sick after drinking, so she might as well get out of here so that no one else gave her those judging looks. Not that she couldn't handle them, she just didn't want to endure it if she didn't have to.

And so, once again, she and Cory were no longer friends that could tease each other, but just a senator and a Storm Trooper. It was sad in a way, but Padmé was glad she had Cory as a sort of ally. It made her feel a little better when she was here in the den of jackals that were waiting for her to fall. And more importantly, he gave her an excuse to criticize Vader and remind her what she had to fight against. When it was just her, in her own mind, she was ashamed to admit that there were moments, she forgot.

## 17. Realizations

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There was something horribly wrong, Padmé just knew it. It had been days since the fateful party, but Vader had not come to her again since taking her to the conference room to yell at her. Not once had he come to collect his due as stated in their bargain. Granted, she'd been a little relieved since they'd been going at it like mynock in mating season, and she was glad for the break. She'd actually been getting soar from all of their amorous activities. But still. This wasn't like Vader to not take what was owed... was it?

What was even more unnerving was the fact that he'd continue to let her have her lunches free of spying. Granted, the first day back she hadn't tried anything since everyone was staring at her like she'd died and come back, and had eaten lunch with Cory to be on the safe side. But that night she'd waited for Vader, but he hadn't come. The next day she'd experimented and told Cory that before she went to lunch she had to talk to Jar Jar in private. The trooper hadn't disobeyed her, and went to stand by the door, giving her privacy like he normally did. The following night, the same thing. Vader had been a no show.

It was starting to scare her out a little. What was wrong with Vader? Had he somehow caught on to her and no longer felt the need to monitor her so closely? Or was he really still that mad at her about what had happened? He hadn't spoken to her much since berating her in the conference room, but he hadn't seemed particularly mad. At least not at her. There was something strange going on, and she'd dearly like to know what it was.

The end of the day was rolling around, and soon the Dark Lord would be here to retrieve her. She hoped there wouldn't be any reporters waiting for them today. The numbers had become increasingly smaller the longer this all played out, and Padmé had been horrified when the producer of one news station was announced dead 'from natural causes' that Monday night, at the old, old age of thirty-six. Yes, yes, it was natural to die from a Vader inflicted injury after you made him angry. Perfectly natural.

People were dying and it was all because she'd been stupid and Vader was put in this strange mood because of her. There were moments when he seemed almost... in pain. Well, not that she could tell, but she just had this feeling that he wasn't feeling the best and was taking his hurt out on everyone else. It was like that old children's story about the ronk with the thorn in its paw, and it roared and roared until someone could pull it out. Only Vader didn't just roar, he bit.

But this couldn't be, could it? Lord Vader was practically invincible! He had destroyed all of the Jedi that were at the Jedi Temple and not received injury, or at least major ones that anyone knew of. He waged war on planets and put down rebellions and never seemed to come home with a single scratch. But there was something in the way he held himself the last few days, the way his stride was not as long as it used to be... Who or what could hurt Vader?

When the doors opened, Padmé was momentarily startled, before she caught sight of the Sith in her doorway. Immediately, she began shutting down her computer and putting away the pads she'd been working on. She knew how impatient the Sith was, and she didn't want to push him.



Today, Vader seemed rather neutral. She didn't get the sense that he was hurting anymore. It was a relief. A part of her had felt rather guilty that he'd been able to heal her when she couldn't return the favor. If he had really been hurt, why hadn't he healed himself? Or didn't it work that way? Why was this man so confusing?

When she made it to his side, he said nothing and turned to leave. As they were walking out of her office, suddenly a young man was before them, hindering their progress to the door. Instantly, Padmé felt Vader's mood darken, and she knew she was going to have to intervene. She couldn't let anyone else die because she'd gotten drunk.

"Lord Vader, Senator Amidala," the man smiled amiably. Again, Vader mood shifted downwards. "Might I just have a moment of your time?"

"No," the Sith growled, before holding up his hand. The reporter flinched, and even whimpered when he was pushed aside with the Force, but Vader didn't wait for him to recover and began walking towards the door again. Padmé followed hoping that the other would get the point and stay away. Really, how stupid were some people? Did they really not realize how dangerous Vader was?

Unfortunately, being spared by a Sith Lord was not as awe-inspiring as it should have been, because the reporter soon ran to catch up with them. "Please!" he called. "Just a few minutes of your time. That's all I'm asking." He began digging in his coat pocket.

The Sith did not reply, though Padmé saw him clench his fists. That wasn't a good sign. "Please let us be," she said, not bothering to look at him, lest he think she was caving.

"I just need a minute!"

This time, the senator didn't reply. She was used to such nosey reporters from when she'd been queen. Although back then, there were usually more that swarmed her all the time. Even though this one was annoying, Vader was pretty good deterrent. Only the most daring—or brainless—ran after him. This one, Padmé was convinced, fell into the brainless category. Could he really not feel how furious Vader was? Could he really not sense the darkness that had fallen over everything?

They had almost made it to the door, when they saw a few other senators talking with each other. They hadn't noticed the Sith yet or they would have run for their lives by now. Senators understood that they were not at all liked by Lord Vader, and usually kept out of his way. Too bad these senator were about to have a confrontation with the infamous Sith Lord as they were currently blocking the exit.

When the other senators realized Vader was coming, they tried to move away, but the reporter saw his chance and reached out, grabbing Padmé by her arm. Not expecting it, she'd kept walking and with his rough, tight grip, her arm was pulled. At the unexpected pain, Padmé cried out, eyes wide as she saw him pulling something out of his coat pocket.

What happened next was so fast, Padmé wasn't exactly sure what had occurred until she saw an arm lying on the floor. Someone screamed, someone else was yelling, but Padmé could only star down in shock at the limb that had not been there a moment before. She began to panic, and she looked up in shock to see the reporter holding a stub where his arm had been before, on his knees screaming in pain, even as someone else was yelling and another person was running towards one of the offices.

Confused, ill, in a daze, Padmé turned her eyes upon the man in black next to her, her mouth and eyes wide open to show her shock. Causally, Vader was standing up from his defensive posture and hooking his lightsaber back on his belt. He'd done it. He'd really done it. She'd known who this man was, knew his reputation for impatience and cruelty, she'd even known that he was the reason that the one producer at the news station had died, yet to see him in action, right before her eyes...

A violent shiver ran through the young woman as the full implications of what had happened and who this man was beside her hit her. It really felt like someone had punched her in the stomach. She'd known before, but now she'd seen it, it was truly confirmed: she was sleeping with a monster.

"What have you done?" she whispered in horror, pale and unable to completely swallow her fear.

Cory was running in from the platform area, blaster drawn and pointing it at anyone who was too near either her or Vader. He hadn't followed them out of her office, and somehow, in the back of her mind, Padmé realized Vader must have sent him ahead to clear away any reporters. Unfortunately, her friend had missed one.

Vader didn't answer her, however, and instead took a step forward so that he was nearly pressed up against her. She shuddered violently, and tried to step back, but he was too fast. Carefully, he grabbed her hand, the one that the reporter had, and pushed down her sleeve. "Don't touch me!" she cried, trying to get away.

But Vader wouldn't let her. He moved his other hand around her back so that she couldn't step away, all the while keeping his gentle grip on her hand. He seemed to be looking at her, inspecting her. There was a red ring around her wrist from where the reporter had grabbed her, but no harm done. She'd been more surprised than anything, yet he'd suffered because of it. She felt so sick. Yet another person suffered because of her mistakes.

Soon, however, the Sith seemed satisfied and let her go. Padmé stumbled backwards, away from him, wanting nothing more than to run away from him, to flee the darkness and the cold. Tears stood out in her eyes as once again confusion wrapped itself around her mind. Was she going into shock?

On the ground, a senator was trying to keep the young man calm, all the while with Cory training his blaster on the injured man and anyone new that came to the group. Vader went and stood over his victim, crossing his arms over his chest. He radiated anger and power. This man was invincible. "Do not touch Senator Amidala."

The young man groaned, sobbing, as he looked away, trying to scramble away from the Sith. It was a pathetic sight and it made Padmé's heart bleed in sympathy and guilt. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, trying to get closer to the young man.

She didn't make it far, as a heavy, black glove came to rest on her shoulder and pulled her back. She tried to fight it, but it was hopeless. Vader was three times, if not more, stronger than her. If he wanted to trap her and keep her from moving, he could do it.

By this time, medical droids and the senate doctor were rushing to the scene, just as more delegates and senators had come to investigate what had happened. Padmé was still shaking,

but Vader was not going to waste any more time. “Trooper,” the voice of the Sith boomed over the crowd, causing everyone to stop what they were doing immediately.

“Sir!” Cory replied instantly, still on full alert, keeping himself between the others and his commander and his charge.

“Take this man to the base for questioning.”

“Yes, Sir!”

“What?” Padmé cried in shock.

“L-L-Lord Vader,” the doctor spoke up. “This man needs m-medical attention.”

“Patch him up for his ride to the Military Base,” Vader snapped. “He will be taken care of further there.”

“You can’t do this!” Padmé shook her head. “You—”

Vader didn’t reply, but pushed her towards the door, even as Cory stayed behind blaster still aimed at the moaning man on the floor. The senator tried to look back, but a strange energy was pushing her forward and she couldn’t stop or do anything but walk onward. He was corralling her with the Force. Knowing this did nothing except serve to make her all the more furious. By the time they were in the speeder, she couldn’t take it anymore.

“You monster!” she screamed. “How could you do that?!”

Screaming didn’t affect the Sith in the slightest. Just as calmly as ever, he lifted the speeder off the ground and they were flying back to the base. His ignoring her only made her more livid. How could anyone be like him?

“Don’t you care that you permanently maimed that young man?” she demanded. “He’ll have to live the rest of his life without that arm!”

At last, she could feel Vader’s mood shift into anger once more. “Younger men than he have lost limbs and survived.”

“That’s not the point!” she cried, so confused and angry and hurt. How could he have done this? “He didn’t do anything wrong!”

“He touched you,” the Sith snapped. “He hurt you.”

“So?” Why did he always have to confuse her like this? She didn’t know how to take that statement or his reaction to it. “He just grabbed me. It only hurt for a second.”

“That was a second too long.”

“Yeah, well now he’s going to be hurting for the rest of his life!” Her stomach lurched at the thought, and she was once again filled with guilt. “He was just a reporter.”

“He was a rebel spy.”

Silence fell over them as Vader weaved in and out of traffic. Of all the things he could have said, that was among the last she would have guessed. A rebel? In the senate? Sure, she knew of senators that were rebels, Bail and Mon coming to mind, but they knew better than to

bring anyone else into this. And to be disgusted as a reporter? What were they thinking? And with Vader right there?

No, no this didn't make any sense. Why on Coruscant would they have an operative in the senate like that? Why would they even get within a meter of the Dark Lord? That was incredibly thoughtless. Now not only did that rebel lose a limb, but he was now going to be tortured for information. This man couldn't be a rebel. It just didn't make sense. Maybe he'd been from some off-branch rebellion radical group that had acted on their own with some sort of crazy plan? It couldn't have been planned by the Rebel Alliance. She hoped no one in charge was that dimwitted.

Finding her voice again, Padmé stared at Vader incredulously. "A rebel spy?"

"He was reaching for his blaster." Brown eyes once more widened in surprise. "He was going to kill you."

"Wh-what?" she asked, taken back. "Why?"

"Because you are with me," Vader voice was surprisingly quiet. "To rebels, you now look like a traitor."

By now they had landed in the hanger bay, but Padmé hadn't really noticed. She sat in shock, her mind thinking of everything at once. "But... But that doesn't make sense. Why would he try to kill me with you there?"

"A suicide mission, no doubt."

"But I haven't... I mean... H-how do you even know?" she demanded. "You're making this up!"

"I can read minds, Senator," the Sith snapped. "His emotions were wild enough that I picked up on his intent before he could act."

Padmé wanted to deny him, wanted to call him a liar, but knew she couldn't. If what he had said was true, he had saved her life. She wasn't sure how to feel about this. Her emotions were completely out of whack and it was making her head spin. She began shaking again as it all began to sink in. She had almost died today, died by a group that she had thought of as allies and friends. Her enemy, a man she hated and fought against, had saved her life. Everything was backwards now. What was she supposed to think?

Was this true? Vader could be lying to her. Sith were known to do that. But thus far she hadn't caught him if he was. He'd been mean to her, he'd yelled at her, scared her, but he'd never lost his temper to the extent where he'd hurt her severely. He'd choked her the first day, but since then, he hadn't harmed her. There were times when he was even kind. She'd thought that his list of geniality would end with healing her and putting up with her drunk. It had never occurred to her that she might have to add saving her life.

What was the universe coming to? There had to be another reason for saving her life. The Emperor wanted her alive. Yes, that was it! But if that was all there was to it, why had he insisted on checking her wrist where the reporter had grabbed her? That almost suggested that he had been concerned. But why? She didn't understand!

It was with a start that Padmé realized Vader was helping her up out of her seat. It wasn't the harsh pulling she was used to, but rather a careful lifting of her to her feet. This wasn't right. He wasn't supposed to act this way with her. He was supposed to remain cold and mean. This... this wasn't right. He was beginning to be too nice, too... alive.

When she was out of her seat, the Sith hastily removed his hands from her, and turned towards the ramp. She wasn't the only one uncomfortable here. Was it possible that Vader hadn't even realized what he was doing? It didn't seem likely, but yet, many things he did recently didn't.

Yet again it was another silent trek to Vader's wing, neither the Sith nor the senator comfortable with speaking. Lieutenant Pilor ran up to them the moment he saw them, and began going over reports that had to be done regarding the recent arrest of the reporter. Arlo kept giving Padmé pitying glances, but she tried to ignore it. She had too much on her mind than to worry about someone feeling sorry for her.

Normally she would have tried to listen in whenever Vader talked business with his P.A. but she didn't feel like it at the moment. She was still too stunned with the revelation that she'd almost been killed and her contradicting feelings towards the Dark Lord. It was amazing how much had changed in only several months. So much, but she was afraid of what that meant.

When he dropped her off at her room, she couldn't bear to look at him, and he apparently didn't mind as he simply turned and left. Once he was gone, Padmé went and sat down on her bed, wondering what the galaxy was coming to.

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By that night, news of what had happened at the senate was all over the holo. Apparently Vader had gotten the story out before anyone could assume he'd attacked a reporter for no reason... though it wasn't as if he hadn't before. But every new station was a buzz with showing pictures apparently from the security cams around the senate, of the young man grabbing her, and then of her horrified expression.

"It was with quick reaction that Lord Vader assessed the situation and stopped the rebel from attacking Senator Amidala. After the arrest, the rebel was found to be with a blaster and a cyanide capsule. The man was under arrest, however, and searched before he could take it and is now being held for questioning."

Padmé shivered. Vader hadn't been lying. That man had really been there to kill her. It still boggled her mind. She wasn't a traitor. She wasn't! She was placed under the worst of circumstances, and yet she was still fighting, still doing all she could for the Alliance. This was the thanks she got? Getting an assassin set to kill her? Betrayal settled over her before she could think better of it.

And then there was Lord Vader. What was she supposed to think of him? What could she think of him? He would never stop changing, even as he remained constant. It was hard to hold strong to beliefs with him there.

A trooper's image flashed on the screen, and despite him wearing his helmet, she knew it was Cory. "Bastard really thought he could get away with it," he explained to one reporter,

even as the reporter was trying to tell him that he couldn't use such language, as though it would make a difference. "I say let it be a lesson to anyone who would attempt to defy the Empire. Mess with anyone here and you'll be stopped."

He was certainly loyal, Padmé had to give her friend that, but she couldn't stand to listen to him talking like that. He was so brainwashed by the Empire, but she'd known that. It was just unsettling that someone she considered a friend could hold such opposite beliefs. But maybe this was just to prove to her that not everything was black and white. Life wasn't made up of simply good and evil. There was so much territory between the two, previously left uncharted by her. Maybe her beliefs were just as flawed as the most uncompromising Imperials? That was a disturbing thought.

Sitting back in bed, she was surprised when the com sounded. Glancing over at the clock it showed it was only twenty-two hundred. Standing, she opened the door to reveal C-3PO. "Good evening, my lady," he said happily.

"Hi, Threepio," she smiled. "Is there something I can do for you? Artoo isn't here. I think he said something about testing a prototype or something."

"Oh, he would do something like that," the protocol droid said almost accusingly. "Yes, well, I'll have to go get him and bring him back here before the master finds out."

The senator smiled. "Then what can I do for you?"

"Oh! Oh my, yes, I'd nearly forgotten!" He held up a black cloth Padmé knew all too well. "Lord Vader requests that you put this on immediately. He will be coming to see you very soon."

So early? This was strange. And not just because of the time. Vader never asked her to be ready for him, never asked her to be blindfolded before he got here. What was he thinking? But she could hardly argue against this. He'd left her alone for nearly a week without hindering her activities. She really ought to be grateful that he had been lenient with her before.

"Okay, thanks," she nodded, taking the blindfold. "And when you find, Artoo, can you make sure to keep him busy while Lord Vader and I are... together?"

"Of course, my lady," the droid said instantly. "Is there anything else you require?"

"No thank you, Threepio."

"Very well. Goodnight, my lady."

"Goodnight."

Padmé watched the golden droid shuffle off in the direction of the lift and couldn't help the smile that came to her lips as she watched him. He was a good droid, sweet, but again, how had such a machine come into Vader's service. Surely the Sith would have gotten tired of 3PO's worrying and fretting all the time. Maybe the droid had been switched off all this time until Padmé had gotten here? No, 3PO seemed too well versed in Vader's manners, too familiar with his moods.

Whatever the case, Padmé was sure she'd never know. So she went and changed into her nightgown, not bothering with panties anymore, before she tied the blindfold around her

head. It felt weird to have this on and be alone. She felt more than a little ridiculous sitting there on the bed like this. But then, what could she do?

Nervousness crept into her stomach again at the idea of Vader being with her. After the way she had yelled at him earlier she felt bad, but also still so confused. What should she think of the Sith Lord? She was still a little angry, but more grateful. As impossible as it'd seemed, he'd been kind to her and kindness went a long way in her book.

The sound of the doors opening made her jump in surprise, and she knew the lights were being turned off. It was eerily silent, and it took Padmé a moment to realize that the respirator was not sounding. Had he come here without his helmet? He'd never done that before. Her chest began to heave at the thought of him so close. To feel those deliciously sinful sensations he elicited within her.

Again, she jumped slightly when she felt his hands on her. She stood up, trying to remain balanced, and went to kneel on the bed. A hand stopped her. A real flesh and blood hand. She froze instantly at the touch. He'd only recently been bold enough to touch her without his glove, but she loved it. There was just something about the skin on skin contact.

He was taking off her nightgown, she realized, as she felt him hold her arms up. Her breath caught. She'd never been fully naked in from of him, and even though it shouldn't have mattered, she found herself self-conscious. What was he looking at? Was there something wrong with her? She was being foolish, but she couldn't help but bite her bottom lip. A part of her wanted him to like her, to not just use her, but to appreciate her, to think she was beautiful.

He was touching her now, that rough, calloused hand she'd dreamed about more than once was touching her shoulder, her neck, down to her chest, and finally to her breast. But it did not stay there. It slowly, lightly, trailed all around, to her stomach, to her hip, to her thigh. Padmé couldn't help the shiver of delight that over took her. He was barely even touching her, but that's what made it so erotic. How was it that this hand, the very one that had hours ago wielded a weapon, had so much blood on it, could be so gentle? Be so timid? Underneath her blindfold, Padmé's eyes slid shut.

For several minutes he just touched her, explored her, and she let him. Her body was his. That was in the contract. But it was more than that now. He had saved her life today. He had healed her. He'd let her take advantage of their deal. At this moment, this was not the same man that had cut off the arm of another person. She could feel it. This was a different person all together. This was... she didn't know but it wasn't really Vader.

Eventually his hand ended up tangled in her hair, while the other, still gloved, pushed lightly at her hip. She took a step backwards until the back of her knees hit the bed. It was time, it was time for what he'd come for. But Padmé found she didn't want this to end. She didn't want the tenderness to be over just yet. When he took her, it was still so impersonal, almost cold. It had gotten better, but she didn't want this moment, whatever had just passed between them, to be lost, tainted.

She turned and crawled onto the bed. His clothing rustled as he was undoubtedly preparing himself, when Padmé turned back around so that she was facing him. Somehow, she had a sense of where he was, and before she lost her nerve, she reached forwards and grabbed him.

His shock was evident to her, but she felt for his neck, then grabbed the sides of his face and pressed her lips to his.

The kiss was one sided for the most part, Vader still being shocked, but Padmé poured everything she had into that kiss. It could very well be her last. But she wanted him to know, she wanted him to feel her confusion, gratefulness, anger, fear, longing, and need. She wasn't sure what she was doing, but this felt right. This felt like it was meant to be, which scared her just as much as it excited her.

Because of who she was kissing, she tried to memorize what he felt like. His lips were full and soft. Much softer than she would have thought, and her hands moved from his neck to his head. She felt hair. Vader actually had hair! He truly was humanoid. It was short, but softer than she would have thought.

Eventually she stopped, not sure, but feeling that it was hopeless. He wasn't responding. She might have lost hope as she pulled away, but then realized he still felt surprised. Surely he'd been kissed before! Even Padmé had kissed! But she was desperate to know what his response would be. It was the first time she had really touched him during this without him initiating anything. But she couldn't wait around anymore. She needed... something, and for whatever reason, it felt as though Vader was the one that could give it to her.

Just when Padmé thought she might need to apologize, she felt his hand on her cheek. She tried to smile at him, still so uncertain and afraid, but she held still. After another moment, she felt him kiss her. It was almost chaste, but she needed more. So much more. So she lightly bit his lip. He responded by pulling away, but she slipped her tongue into his mouth. The sound of him gasping slightly amused her, and made her wonder if he really hadn't kissed anyone before. But she wasn't about to let him go, and wrapped her arms around his neck, ensuring that he was trapped.

Eventually, he began to respond, even going as far as to mimic her. She turned next to his neck. His hand was almost instantly buried in her hair as he squirmed against her. Without his permission, she tried to pull him down on the bed with her, but he weighed too much. He soon realized what she was doing and wrapped his arm around her as he laid her down.

The moment, however, her head hit the bed, he was all over her. His mouth suddenly attacked her, kissing her neck, even biting it lightly. Padmé could honestly say she'd never felt anything so pleasurable in her life. But he didn't stop there. He was lost now, and started kissing and licking and biting her everywhere. Her breasts were his next target, and she had to gasp when he attacked them. Her hands automatically latched onto his back, and she realized he was still wearing a shirt of some kind. But it was loose fitting, so she slipped her hands under it and began running her hands up and down his back.

What she found when she touched him surprised her again. Taunt muscles. She couldn't see them, but she felt them. Letting her hands roam, her brain was still able to register that he really was muscular, and he certainly had abs. Maybe he wasn't old as she'd thought.

But soon she had to stop her investigation as Vader was becoming impatient. He entered her so suddenly, Padmé couldn't help but moan. But it hadn't hurt. At all. In fact, she'd been burning just as much as he had. She'd needed him, and finally, he was responding to her.



He began slamming into her, all gentleness gone, and Padmé couldn't have cared in the slightest. Her groans and whimpers only encouraged him as he continued, still sucking and nibbling her neck. He was overwhelming her, but she loved every second of it. She needed it.

Eventually, they couldn't focus on anything else but the basic need of release. Padmé didn't repress the sounds coming from her, and even Vader was grunting and making more than usual. The tension built until Padmé thought she would die with want. And just when she thought she was going to start screaming she wanted release so bad, she got it.

It was like a burst of flame swept over her entire body, burning her before immediately smoldering into a superb simmer that made her body hum. She was so high from the feeling that she hadn't noticed Vader was still going until a moan finally escaped him and she felt his weight pressed on top of her, his face buried in the croak of her neck.

For the first time since their deal, Vader didn't immediately get up and leave. Instead, he lay on top of her, both of them panting and sweating. He was so heavy, and yet the weight was comforting. Padmé could have stayed that way for quite a while, but eventually Vader rolled off of her, and sat up. When the bed came up, she knew he was on his feet. He was going to leave her.

"Wait!" she called.

He touched her shoulder, letting her know that he was still there. He didn't speak. But he didn't need to. Padmé used his arm as a guide to his face. When she came to it, she took his face in both of her hands once more, and kissed him softly. "Goodnight," she whispered.

Vader tensed, she could feel it, but he didn't leave. She was hoping he would say something, yearning to hear the sound of his real voice, but he didn't. Instead, he kissed her hand, then the other, before leaving her alone in the dark, physically satisfied, but emotionally wanting.

## 18. Ensnared

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There was something happening. He wasn't the Sith he should be. It had been happening so gradually that he'd tried to ignore it, tried to justify himself and his actions. He'd seen all the signs, but disregarded them. And now... this.

Sitting in his hyperbaric chamber, Vader sat with his head in his hands, staring down at his boots. What was happening to him? He couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, couldn't do anything without thinking about her. Senator Padmé Amidala. She'd bewitched him, it was the only conceivable explanation, yet he didn't know how it was possible. She was so... alive. She was captivating. And like a fool, he'd walked into her trap. He felt... something for her. Whatever it was, however, he knew it went beyond lust. He'd lusted over things before, but this... this was terrifying.

Every time he closed his eyes he could see her smile, or her big brown eyes staring up at him pleadingly. She was just one woman, for Force sake, and yet she had woven herself into his soul until he couldn't simply extract her. It would be too painful, too horrifying to try. She was there now, and he couldn't get her out.

He tried ignoring her, tried to undo, to un-feel what he could, but it didn't seem to help. Every step back he tried to take caused a fierce ache in his chest that very nearly overwhelmed him each time he attempted. The Force was pushing him forward, telling him something, but no matter how Vader tried to block it out, he heard it anyway. Let go of your anger, it seemed to say. Give into the Light. But he couldn't.

As of the day before, he'd now spent a full fifteen years living in darkness. The darkness had been his constant companion, the one thing that he could turn to, and it always waited for him with open arms. But those arms weren't warm. Those arms weren't inviting. The Darkness was cold and cruel and did not comfort, it did not give. It took and took until he had nothing left, not even his soul. He was empty because of the Darkness, but it had also made him strong. It had made him who he was.

But did he really like the person he'd become?

Why couldn't things go back to the way they had been before? It had taken years for Vader to learn how to cope with the guilt of his sins, with the powers he could harness, and just when he had finally become numb to it all, he was once again thrown into the fires of passion. To feel so much other than the anger that had been his confidant for so long. He was torn and he didn't know what to do.

He'd already interrogated the prisoner that had tried to assassinate Amidala. To assassinate Padmé. It turned out he was a rouge even among rebels, and had decided that the senator had betrayed them all. Without authorization from the Rebel High Command, he'd decided to go on his own suicide mission and kill the senator and maybe even shoot him in the process. Apparently the fool hadn't heard about the powers of a Sith Lord or at least didn't believe them. Vader was fortunate that he reacted as quickly as he did.

But then that was also a problem. It wasn't just that he'd reacted without thought, it was the fact that he'd reacted when called by the Light. It hadn't been the Darkness to warn him, it had been the Light. The Dark Side only cared for self-preservation, the Light cared about everything else. He had simply reacted to the warning without second thought. It was only later that he realized he'd called upon the Light Side of the Force.

There was something seriously wrong with him. He couldn't understand why this was happening, but knew it was centered around Padmé. He was getting too... attached to her. It was dangerous and stupid of him, but he couldn't help it. She was the first creature to ever reach out to him since he'd left his homeworld. She'd been the first person in just as long whose touch did not hurt. What had started out as curiosity and a deal was quickly overtaking them both. He had felt her emotions the previous night, the way she had kissed him. It was a very bad sign. She was falling into her own trap faster than he was.

This had to stop! Before it destroyed them both!

But he didn't want it to stop! He'd been through so much in his young life, could he not, just this once, have something of his own? Something beautiful that he did not destroy? It was not the way of the Sith, but it was what he desperately wanted. He wanted this more than he'd ever wanted anything else in his life, including his freedom from Sidious.

Sidious. He had a meeting with his master soon to talk about the rebel. It had been an urgent summons. No doubt his master felt the shifting of the Force. The Emperor would hardly care so much for one rebel, it was just an excuse to question Vader. He knew this, and he would prepare accordingly. But oh how he dreaded the encounter. Just the thought of seeing his master right now left a bad taste in his mouth. The thought of being around the elder Sith made him feel sick.

Why? He hadn't felt this way around Sidious since he'd been a child. Was the Darkness really leaving him? Or was he leaving it? Either way, it distressed Vader. The Darkness was strength, the Light was weakness. Right? Then why was it that the Light could push him from his resolve, when the Darkness could not hold? Why was it that in the competition for his soul, the Light was slowly pulling ahead?

You don't have a soul, Vader scolded himself. You carved that out years ago.

The dark thought depressed him even when it should have cheered him. He was weakening. He was not the man he was several months ago. He was something else. Something different. He didn't like it. It scared him.

Sighing, he stood up from his chair and grabbed his helmet and mask. He was about to put them on when he caught his reflection on the computer terminal. Staring at his reflection, he couldn't help the sadness he felt looking into harsh, ruby-gold eyes. A long, long time ago, almost another lifetime, he could have stared into the computer and seen blue. But that had been a different person, just a boy, young and innocent. He was anything but, now.

Yet as he continued to stare, slowly bringing his hand up to run it through his hair. His eyes closed as he remembered Padmé's delicate fingers trying to tangle themselves there. How those warm palms had been pressed against his face so gently. So soft. He had to make sure it never happened again. What if the Emperor found out and killed her? He couldn't let that happen!

It took all of his strength of will to replace the mask over his face and seal the helmet. It wouldn't be long now before he could rid himself of it forever. He just had to be patient. But even as he reminded himself of his inevitable seizure of power, he couldn't help the claustrophobia that settled in over him. It was getting worse. It was almost better to leave it on so he wouldn't have to force himself to put it on again, but he couldn't help wish to taste the fresh air again, to breathe and not hear the accursed hissing of the respirator. How he longed to be back with Padmé, lying next to her, breathing and not worry about the life support suite at all.

But he couldn't. Not right now. Maybe tonight...

No. Not tonight. Not ever again. He couldn't fall into this again! But he couldn't stay away. He was going insane with want, insane with indecision. Something had to give, but he wasn't sure what.

Walking out of his room, Vader couldn't help but be pulled to the senator's door. She wasn't there right now. She was at the senate. A part of him wanted to go inside and just be there. Maybe lie down in her bed, see if he could smell the scent of her hair on her pillow. But he didn't, and not just because he was fairly certain that it was weird. Senator Amidala was like an addiction, and he had to cut himself off if he were ever to get back to his normal self.

On his way to the palace, he made sure to mentally prepare himself to be before his master. He couldn't have Sidious suspecting anything was occupying his apprentice's mind save for power and the Empire. While the Emperor had expressed his desire that the senator be kept alive, that she could be useful, Vader was certain that if it came between choosing her or his apprentice, Sidious would chose Vader and have the young woman terminated immediately. That could not happen. Her life could not be extinguished from this world!

When he made it to the Throne Room, he was let in by the Royal Guards, who seemed to be watching him closely. They were wary of him, more than usual. He could feel it. There was something going on here. Perhaps he hadn't been as good at keeping his thoughts private? No, that could not be. His master must just still be suspicious of him. It was smart for the old man to be, but foolish since he was no doubt suspicious for the wrong reasons. At least in part.

As he walked into the room, Vader saw that it was clear except for more Royal Guards and the Emperor. The same as always. Perhaps he was just being paranoid. As always he knelt down before the throne, trying not to let his anger at still having to show respect for this man be revealed to his master.

"What is thy bidding, my master?"

As was custom, the Emperor told him to rise. "I understand that you apprehended a rebel last evening," was his opening. It was almost pleasant sounding. Vader had to be on his guard.

"Yes, my master."

"Have you discovered his purpose?"

"He came to assassinate Senator Amidala."

The Emperor appeared thoughtful, but for what reason, it was hard to say. "For what purpose? She is a rebel herself."

“Rumor of her... connection to me has spread far,” Vader began carefully. “This man was under the impression that the senator betrayed the Rebellion and so took it upon himself to punish her.”

“I see,” Sidious drawled slowly. “What else were you able to find out?”

“He was not necessarily acting on part of the Rebel Alliance,” the younger Sith reported. “I have no doubt that the senator’s friends in Rebel High Command were trying to protect her image despite rumor. Bail Organa in particular would have been aware of the fact that Amidala was merely drunk. This man disagreed with all defense and acted on his own. A foolish decision,” he sneered.

The Emperor was nodding along. “And what have you learned from Amidala about this?”

“She is confused, Master,” Vader began carefully, not wanting to give anything away about his lover that he didn’t have to. Of course he knew a lot of what she did. He knew she was passing information, knew she was trying to trick him, but his master didn’t need to know that. Indeed, his master wouldn’t find out until the end when Vader was standing over him, lightsaber blazing, and taking the last breaths of this life. “She did not know who this would-be assassin was.”

“Not at all?” the Emperor sounded just as disappointed as disgusted.

“No. She believed his ruse as a reporter. She also did not take it well that I accused him of being a rebel.”

“I find it hard to believe that that’s all you learned from her,” Sidious sneered, narrowing his eyes in distrust.

“Even with the gradual link, her mind resistance is considerable,” Vader supplied easily, showing the truth of his words to his master. “I have learned for certain that she is a rebel as well as Bail Organa and Mon Mothma. Do you wish for me to dispose of them?”

While his words sounded causal, Vader hoped his master wouldn’t say yes. He was bluffing, and he wasn’t sure what he would do if his master called it. There was no way he would let the Emperor kill Senator Amidala, but he also didn’t really want to have to kill the other two senators. They were Padmé’s friends. He doubted she would be very impressed if he disposed of them. In fact, he was certain that she would probably never want to talk to him again, would end their deal, and certainly never want to have another night as they had last evening. The last, in particular, hurt. He wasn’t sure he could go with never experiencing that again.

“No,” the Emperor said slowly. “No, not yet, my young apprentice. We may yet be able to bleed more information from them. Have them monitored extensively. Anything that goes on in that senate, I want to know about it.”

“Yes, Master.”

Again the two fell silent, Vader waiting for either more or to be dismissed, while Sidious seemed content to study his apprentice longer. What he was looking for was anyone’s guess, but Vader made sure that his shields were up and that nothing could leak through. He even surrounded himself with all of the Darkness he could without going into a rage and end up killing everyone here. But then, would that have been such a bad thing?

“There has been a disturbance in the Force,” the elder Sith continued at last.

Vader automatically nodded. “I have felt it.” Of course he’d felt it. It originated from him!

It was torturous to wait for his master to continue. Vader, however, in that time readied himself in case of a fight. If his master knew it had come from him, he would no doubt punish him, and something in Vader knew he couldn’t take it. Not again. He was becoming desperate to avoid his master as much as possible, to just be left alone. He couldn’t take another electrocution or beating or whipping anymore. He would snap if he did. That was a guarantee.

Thankfully, however, his master was still apparently not aware of his apprentice’s flirtation with the Light Side of the Force. Or if he was, he was not overly concerned. If that was the case, Vader could only suspect that he had something else to entrench his apprentice in the Darkness once more.

“A Jedi has been seen on Geonosis,” the Emperor stated. The younger Sith instantly became more alert. “He was seen snooping about the old Separatist headquarters.”

Anger flared in Vader at the thought of a Jedi, and his hands automatically balled into fists. He hated them. All of them, even after nearly four years. They didn’t deserve life and he would take pleasure in taking it. It was an insult to everything he’d ever worked towards that a Jedi was yet alive!

The Emperor was smiling, but Vader ignored it. “I will leave immediately, Master.”

“See that you do, Lord Vader,” Sidious nodded. ‘Find this Jedi,’ he spat the name. “Find it and destroy it.”

“As you wish, my master,” the younger man bowed before he turned and stalked out of the room, his mind swirling with hatred and loathing. He would find this Jedi and he would kill him. He would find him and take revenge for what one of his fellows had done to him. He would have his revenge on all the Jedi. Even if it took the rest of his life, he would see to it that they were all exterminated from the galaxy.

But revenge would not sit well with Padmé, he couldn’t help but realize. She stood for justice, not revenge. But was he not enacting justice for what had been done to him? This was justice. The Jedi had tried to kill him, so he would kill them all to ensure that they could never attempt to kill him again. Yet, he had a strange feeling come over him, something whispering sorrow at his thoughts. Padmé’s sad, horrified face came to mind.

Growling in frustration at these conflicting emotions, the Sith strode down the palace halls and to the hanger where he jumped in his speeder and was away. He would need to get a shuttle and then be on his way to a Star Destroyer that would take him to Geonosis. Preparations would have to be made, and it would probably take half an hour before a suitable ship could be found. He despised waiting, and wasn’t sure what he would do between time. Though one idea did come to mind.

When he made it back to the base, he called for his P.A. and like a good man, Pilor was there within minutes. Vader explained what he needed done and for the Lieutenant to find a ship while he saw to other business. The young man saluted and immediately saw to the details. The Sith, too, didn’t wait around, and turned to enter a shuttle and flew off towards the senate.

When he landed, the guards gave him a wide berth no doubt remembering he'd cut off a man's arm last he was here. Normally their fear would have amused him, would have fed his lust for Darkness, but he didn't even pay attention now. His mind was torn between wanting to kill the Jedi that had appeared, and seeing Padmé before he left, not wanting her to be angry with him. When he'd started caring about such things was a mystery, but it was true all the same.

When he came to her office suite, he entered as abruptly as always, and found the Storm Trooper just outside the senator's door, faithfully guarding. Her personnel, however, shrank back at the sight of him, but he didn't notice them. Indeed, he didn't notice anything else except the small woman behind the large desk at the far end of the room, who, from the moment she'd heard him enter, turned large brown eyes to him, and smiled.

She was smiling at him. Him! Why would she do such a thing? Especially after all he'd done to her. He'd made her life a living hell for months. His chest ached fiercely at the sight, and it made him feel both pleased and distraught at the same time. She was smiling at him. But would she if she knew what he was going to do?

But he could not dwell on that. The senator was already standing up, so Vader made his way into her office and shut the door behind him. The closer he was to her, the more he hurt. It wasn't just longing, it hurt. Was something wrong with him? What was this strange power she had over him? How could she make him feel this way? To create such sensations that nearly drove him mad?

"Is something wrong?"

The simple question grabbed Vader from his thoughts and brought him back to reality. He could not focus on this woman. He had come here with purpose and then he would soon be out in the galaxy hunting. It used to be one of his favorite things, but now... Now all the young Sith wanted to do was stay here, near this woman who was causing him so much agony.

"I'm leaving," he said simply.

Brown eyes blinked for a moment in surprise, before the senator nodded. "All right. When will you be back?"

"I don't know."

So much disappointment! She didn't want him to leave. How was this possible? "You'll be all right, though... won't you?" she asked timidly.

It was beginning to be too much. He couldn't handle this. Not her. Not like this. What was wrong with him?! "Yes. While I'm gone, the same rules apply," he pushed onward. "Except I would advise you not speak to certain... friends."

She blinked at him, again, becoming wary. "What do you—"

"The entire senate is being watched," he said quietly, not even knowing why he bothered to tell her. But he didn't want her to get in trouble. He had already made up his mind to betray his master very soon, so he didn't stop to feel any form of guilt. Guilt was beneath a Sith Lord, but Vader had to admit, it wasn't entirely beneath him.

“Oh,” was her only reply. She looked confused again, and sad. He didn’t like it. “I suppose I’ll see you in... well, whenever you return.”

“When you return to base, call your family,” he told her, not even really sure what he was saying. He just wanted to tell her something that would make her happy again.

Padmé gawked up at him in utter shock. “What?...B-but I thought—?”

“Do you not want to talk to them?” he snapped, becoming increasingly uncomfortable with not only the situation, but himself. What he was doing was wrong, but he couldn’t back out now.

“No! No, I-I want to talk to them,” she said quickly. And again, a slow smile crept onto her face. How it hurt him! “Thank you.”

This was wrong. This was not how a Sith Lord was supposed to act. There was something terribly wrong with him. But he couldn’t help it. He couldn’t stop this... this... whatever it was with the senator. Kriff, he would give anything to make the agony of being near her and being away from her disappear! To be his old self again! But he couldn’t. Not matter what, he would lose.

And so, for the first time in Vader’s life, he turned and left, running away from a challenge, from his problems. And even as wonderful as her smiles really were, he couldn’t stand to see it anymore. He had to stop thinking about her. He had work to do.

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For the first time since meeting him, Padmé realized that she’d witnessed Lord Vader flustered. There was something going on with him, but she didn’t know what. He hadn’t seemed like his normal self. He’d seemed a lot more brooding and pensive. Maybe the mission he was going on caused this?

But she didn’t really want to be depressed at the moment. She’d gotten permission from Vader to contact her family. After nearly six months, she was finally going to talk to them! Once more, the Dark Lord of the Sith had done something nice for her. She couldn’t help but smile.

After several deep breaths, she punched in the code for Naboo on a terminal in one of the conference rooms in Vader’s wing, and sat back, waiting to be patched through to her parents. After waiting several minutes, her father’s face came on the screen. “Hello?” he asked, clearly not recognizing the number from where she was calling. But the moment he saw her, he brightened considerably. ‘Padmé!’ he cried. “Jobal! Get in here!”

Before Padmé could have said anything, she heard her mother coming into the room. “Ruwee, what on Naboo are you yelling about— Padmé!” she exclaimed seeing her youngest on the screen.

“Hi mom. Hi dad,” Padmé smiled. “How are you?”

“How are we?” her father snorted. “I think that’s what we’re supposed to ask you! Dear Force, Padmé, what’s happened? What’s going on?”



“We’ve been hearing all sorts of strange things for the past several months!” her mother added. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Padmé tried to reassure her parents, but wasn’t sure if she was getting through to them. “It’s just been... hard to communicate lately.”

“Padmé,” her mother said gently. Too gently. The way her mother said her name nearly overwhelmed the young woman, and she quickly found tears in her eyes. It was just so good to see and hear her family again. It’d been too long. “What happened, sweetheart?”

Taking a deep breath, trying not to let herself become overwhelmed again, she smiled at her parents. “Well, it started almost six months ago,” she began carefully. ‘The Emperor heard rumors about me being in the Rebel Alliance, or was at least a rebel sympathizer.’ Her parents’ stiffened. “He was concerned for my safety, and began an investigation into the matter. He was also concerned that everyone at the senate would turn on me and feared attacks against my life so he assigned Lord Vader to watch over me and had me moved into the Imperial Military Base for my own protection.”

Even though Vader had said she could talk to her family, she was fairly certain he didn’t want anyone to know the truth about what had happened. And she couldn’t very well burden her parents with the knowledge that their daughter was indeed a rebel and had very nearly lost her life. She didn’t want them to have to worry, to be afraid for her. They wouldn’t understand how she’d gotten into this mess, nor would they understand all the secrets she’d been keeping and her involvement with Vader. But most importantly, she didn’t want to endanger them. The less they knew the better.

Ruwee Naberrie, however, didn’t look at all pleased with this explanation. “They just took you away from your apartment? Why didn’t you tell us sooner?! We’ve been trying to get ahold of you for months!”

“I’m so sorry, dad.” Once more, her emotions unexpectedly ran high. She’d never meant to hurt them. “But Lord Vader has been rather... paranoid about my safety and thought it would be best to keep my off-world communications down until all of this mess with the rebels was figured out.”

It sounded lame to her and absolutely fake. Darth Vader didn’t really strike anyone in the galaxy as being the protective type. Yet he had proven to be so with her, at least, if yesterday was any indication.

“And he couldn’t’ve let you at least send one message in all that time?” Ruwee scowled.

“Apparently not,” Padmé shrugged, trying to seem as calm as possible on this issue. “I’d asked him several times to let me contact you, but it was only today that he said I could.”

“What makes today so special, I wonder?” Jobal frowned.

“Well...” Padmé bit her bottom lip, wondering just how much she should say. “A rebel assassin was captured yesterday.”

“Assassin?!” Ruwee’s eyes went wide. “You were almost assassinated?!”

“Oh, Padmé!” her mother cried, looking as though she wanted to come through the screen and crush her daughter in a hug.

"It's fine, I'm not hurt," Padmé reassured quickly. Apparently news of yesterday hadn't gotten to Naboo yet. "Lord Vader happened to be right there and took care of the assassin, who is now in custody."

Both Ruwee and Jobal's eyes went rather wide, but they remained silent. Apparently she'd said something that put them on alert and roused suspicion, though she couldn't figure out what. It made her feel paranoid. "What?"

"Sweetheart," her mother began carefully. "Your father and I are relieved that you're all right, we really are. And we're grateful that you've been looked after but... well..."

"What's with these rumors of you and Lord Vader being a couple?" her father finished.

Of course they'd hear about that. Of all the lies that had to have been spread about her, why had it involved Vader? What made it worse, however, was that the rumors weren't exactly too far off. As Vader had pointed out, they were close enough to being a couple as it was, and that was dangerous. From what she could gather, Vader was not supposed to have any sort of physical intimacy with her at all, even for torturing purposes. What they were doing was skating on thin ice, and Padmé knew it was only a matter of time before something got out. She just had to make sure it wasn't because of her.

"We're not a couple, dad," she rolled her eyes to show the ridiculousness of such a thing, even as her heart hurt at the thought. "Those pictures were taken and shown out of context."

Her parents were silent a moment, before his father raised an eyebrow. "So what was the context?"

For the first time in many, many years, Padmé felt like a girl again, her father suspicious of all the boys that talked to her. She couldn't help the blush of frustration and embarrassment that came over her face. "It was nothing," she sighed. "We were both invited to the party, and since I was staying at the base and he pretty much lives here and was assigned to protect me, we went together. And I... may or may not have had a little to drink."

She winced when she saw her mother's expression. "Padmé Naberrie!" Jobal exclaimed. "How much to drink? Don't you know that can be dangerous?!"

"Especially with a man like Vader around," Ruwee added angrily.

"Nothing happened!" Padmé exclaimed in frustration. Not then, anyway. "Besides, I'm twenty-four-years-old. I can look after myself."

"That's not the point, sweetheart," her mother sighed. "We just worry about you. We want you to be safe. It's not that we don't trust you, it's—"

"It's everyone else we don't trust," her father added.

While it was comforting to know that her parents still loved her enough to scold and worry about her, Padmé couldn't help feel a little exasperated. It just went to show that you could be a queen of an entire planet and then a galactic senator, and your parents still wanted to meddle. They probably still thought of her as a little girl.

But before Padmé could reassure them, her door opened. Startled, she turned around, almost hoping that it was Vader and that his mission had been canceled, but was surprised to see a trooper in the doorway. "Cory!" she exclaimed in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

The trooper stayed in the doorway, still very much in professional mode. “Senator,” he nodded. “The Emperor wishes an audience with you.”

The color in Padmé’s face drained. The Emperor? What did he want? Vader hadn’t said anything about meeting with the Emperor... But maybe he hadn’t known. After all, the Sith had been sent out on a mission, leaving her all alone. If the Emperor was going to do something to her, it’d be now. There would be no Vader to intervene. The thought made her sick.

“A-all right,” she nodded. ‘I’ll be ready in just a moment.’ Turning back to the screen, she saw her parents looking very concerned. “I have to go now,” she tried to smile at them. “I’ll try and call again very soon.”

“Be careful, sweetheart,” Jobal nearly whispered. “We love you.”

“Love you too,” Padmé smiled again, “Send my love to Sola and her family too,” she said before having to turn off the screen.

As she stood, she saw Cory still waiting for her patiently. He was still in trooper mode, and it didn’t make her feel better. She was becoming frightened. She wished her friend could give her some comfort.

Neither of them spoke as they made their way out of Vader’s wing and to the palace. Whatever was going to happen, she just hoped that she could withstand the Emperor as she had the last time she’d been before him, because there really was no Vader to save her now.

## 19. Shattered

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When they made it to the Throne Room, Padmé couldn't help the nervousness she felt at seeing those overly large doors again. She didn't exactly have the best memories of this place. But at least this time she wasn't dragged in by Storm Troopers, just escorted by a friend who happened to be a trooper. But she couldn't even take much comfort in the fact that Cory was with her. He was a Storm Trooper, she had to remember that, and his duty went before everything else. That was just the way of things.

The Royal Guards opened the doors for them in unison, and even though she shouldn't, Padmé wondered at the men who guarded the Emperor. Where were the troopers too? If not, what sort of men willingly guarded such an evil man? Had they been brainwashed or simply misguided? They just didn't seem real to her, to be so perfectly in sync with one another. It was unnatural.

But she turned her mind away from them and focused her full attention on protecting herself against the Emperor. When she'd been guarded by Jedi in the past, they'd briefly taught her how to raise her shields against unwanted invasion of the mind. But she knew it only went for light probing. If a Force-sensitive wanted to get into her head badly enough, there was nothing she could do to stop it. The thought made her feel cold inside, but she could not give into despair. She refused to let Palpatine win.

When they stopped before the throne, Cory bowed low, but Padmé refused. The Emperor's sickly yellow eyes surveyed her with barely concealed contempt. He flicked his hand dismissively. "Leave us."

Once more, Cory bowed low before he turned and walked out of the room, leaving the senator to face the dragon alone. She knew he was only doing his duty, but Padmé couldn't help but feel abandoned all the same. Would she even live to see her twenty-fifth birthday? She wasn't sure.

"Senator Amidala," the Emperor began neutrally. "I see Lord Vader has been keeping you in good health."

Setting her jaw, Padmé lifted her head defiantly. "He has."

The old man smiled sickeningly. "It surprises me considering he tends to forget about your existence every time I talk to him."

It took everything within Padmé to keep her expression from changing, even as the Sith's words stung. They did more than just sting. It was more like a slap to the face. Vader forgot about her? Did he not care about her? Had everything they'd been through, what they'd just done the previous night, really mean nothing to him? It should not have surprised Padmé. Vader was a Sith too, after all, and had made it very clear in the beginning that he didn't like her and didn't care about her. But she'd thought that had changed.

No. She could not let the Emperor feel her distress. Could not let him on to the fact that Vader meant anything to her. She wasn't certain, but the senator had the feeling that if

Palpatine found out that she cared about Vader or the reverse, that not only would she be endangering herself, but Vader as well. Even if what the Emperor had said was true, she couldn't let Vader be hurt. She couldn't deny it anymore. She cared about Vader, and she couldn't let him be punished because of her.

So, screwing up her courage, pushing aside all feeling, Padmé raised an eyebrow at her former mentor, as if to ask why she should care. Indeed, she let her anger surface so if he was watching her mentally, he could get nothing except resentment. "So?" she even managed to audaciously cross her arms over her chest. "Why would he be thinking of me?"

Palpatine's smile melted from his thin, pale lips, as his eyes narrowed into slits. He said nothing for a moment as he stared at her. Padmé could feel something brush up against her mind, but she fought it, not letting it in. Somehow, she found the strength to push it away with something she didn't even think was her own. But she latched on to it, as it helped expel the Emperor. She would worry about what it was later.

"He should be thinking about you often," the Emperor said slowly. "I've assigned him to guard you, after all."

"And he has," she replied flatly.

"Yes," he drawled leaning back. "I find it curious, however, that you seem in good spirits, considering his close... attention to you."

"He's not all that hard to live with," she scowled up at him. "You keep him running around everywhere at all hours of the day, I imagine."

"What has he told you of his work?"

The suspicion in his voice was not hard to miss, and Padmé found herself surprised by it. It wasn't just suspicion, it was anger, even hatred. Not once had she stopped to consider that maybe Vader and the Emperor didn't like each other. It just didn't seem plausible. They were always together, two Sith Lords that had built the Empire together. The public was shown how much they supported each other, but was there something else to their partnership? She would have to do some digging. Maybe she could even ask Vader?

"He says nothing," she scowled deeper. "Why would he?"

Again, she felt something dark brush against her mind, but once more, something surged in her mind that expelled the Emperor's attempts. It felt strange, like she wasn't even a part of it. Like it was two different forces fighting over her mind, and she was just in the middle. But she tried not to let her panic at the thought get the better of her. Right now she had to focus solely on Palpatine.

"I was hoping you would tell me," he said drily, leaning back in his throne, apparently not believing her, but not having enough to act against her. Truly Palpatine was different than Vader. She knew for a fact that Vader reacted and gave into his temper without a second thought. Palpatine was more cunning, it seemed, watching and waiting, that was his style. It made her wonder again if the two Sith Lords could work together.

"I know nothing," she allowed bitterness to enter her voice. After a pause, she decided to do a bit more acting. "Why are you still holding me? I haven't done anything! I've been

locked away with Vader for nearly half a year and still nothing. I can't do anything and nothing's happened. Can't you see I'm innocent?"

The Emperor started laughing an eerie cackle that disgusted her just as much as it frightened her. "You are far from innocent, Senator. We both know that," he grinned evilly. 'I just haven't decided what I want your fate to be.' Despite her best efforts, she paled. It caused the Sith to smile wider. "I could have Lord Vader kill you. He's been anxious to do so for quite some time. Just today he asked if he could dispose of you."

Again, Padmé fought to keep her face masked, but she couldn't quite do it. Once more she'd been slapped in the face by the cold, callousness of Vader. Had he really said that? Was he really just waiting around for the order to kill her? Did she really mean so little to him after all they'd done together? Or was this a lie? No, it couldn't be a lie. It sounded exactly like something Vader would do. Vader had his moments of strangeness when he was almost kind, but they weren't common. Maybe she'd been a fool to believe that there was something worth caring about in him.

But she had to carry on, had to keep this despicable mask and hide her pain, hide her sorrow and horror. When before the Emperor, one always had to be on their guard. So, after glaring at him a moment longer, making sure her voice was steady, she asked, "Then why hasn't he?"

Palpatine laughed again, probably sensing her fear and anger. "Because I told him not to," he smirked. "Have you not yet realized that he is my slave, Senator?" he asked mockingly. "Vader only ever does anything with my approval. If I told him to come back here and kill you, he would do so without hesitation, without mercy. And if I told him to torture you until you told us everything about the rebellion, he would take great joy in doing it.

"What, did you think that you were safe with him?" the Emperor sneered, even as Padmé found she couldn't breathe. "Did you really think that he had any humanity left? That perhaps by occupying space close to him that he would think better of you?" She didn't reply.

"No, Senator," he continued. "You are gravely mistaken. He knows his place and does as he's told. He only saved you from that rebel assassin because he knew I would be displeased if you had died then. Not that it would have been a great loss," he added.

But by then, Padmé was hardly listening. Even as she was breaking on the inside, she held her mask, forcing her face to remain set, even as she wanted to cry. She could not do so here. Not now. "I know what he is," she said, her voice hard, emotionless, lest a sob escape.

"Good," the Emperor sneered, but sat back to regard her again. It was only by sheer stubbornness that she hadn't cracked yet, but she knew she couldn't handle this much longer. 'Must be alarming,' he began again in mock-pity, "to know that you are living with a creature that would enjoy killing you, and then having your old friends out to kill you as well." Her lower lip quivered, but she refused to give in, even as she felt darkness slowly crushing her.

"You will die one way or another, Senator," Palpatine smiled. "But it will be when I say. I look forward to the day when Lord Vader brings me your head."

With a wave of his hand, the Emperor dismissed her. Padmé continued to glare at him, even as tears so desperately wanted to form in her eyes. She wouldn't let them. And she hardly noticed when she felt someone take her by the arm, gently, and pull her away, out the

door. She didn't remember walking through the palace or being led by Cory. She didn't remember the ride back to the base, or walking to the lift and up to Vader's wing.

Only when she was carefully helped to sit down on her bed did she come out of her defensive mask and looked over to see Cory staring at her, helmet lying next to him on the floor as he watched her with concern. That was all it took, to see real concern.

Padmé finally snapped and she began bawling. She couldn't help it, couldn't stop it. Without realizing what she was doing, she threw her arms around Cory's neck and sobbed into his armored shoulder, not caring how uncomfortable it was. She couldn't even feel it. All she felt was a stabbing pain in her heart as the Emperor's words repeated themselves over and over again in her mind.

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Obi-Wan Kenobi sighed as he looked around the desert world that held so many terrible memories. It had not been too far away from here where his padawan had been killed. Just being on the planet again made him ill and brought a swell of emotions. But he couldn't concentrate on that now. No, his former master had come to him again with news: The Chosen One was coming to Geonosis.

The young Knight could hardly believe it. The Chosen One! Coming here of all places! And to think, he'd considered not coming here at all. It had only been after meditation, even before Qui-Gon had come to him the first time, that the Force had suggested the planet to him. Truly the Force worked in mysterious ways.

He'd been here for weeks now, searching for any signs of Imperial presence. There was none. Not really. Much of the Separatists' bases here had long been destroyed almost beyond recognition. The clones had seen to that, and the natives made sure to stay far away. They, no doubt, remembered the war only several years back now. While the planet was Imperial, it was odd, at least to Obi-Wan, that there wasn't more of a presence here. Maybe the Imperial realized what a worthless dust ball this place really was?

Sighing, the Jedi sat down in one of the old control rooms that had been a base for the Separatists. He'd stayed here for a few days, despite knowing how dangerous it was. If the Chosen One was to come here, he wanted to make sure that he was found. He had a very great feeling that today would be the day.

But in the meantime, he occupied himself by trying to get some of the old computers working. It was largely useless, but soon he discovered one that hadn't been so severely damaged by the troopers' rambunctious shooting spree. There was a lot of dust in everything and sand, but he managed to get it working again. The image that came up, however, filled him with both anger and bitterness.

Dooku. Of course it would show that traitorous pig. It had shocked the Council when it had learned of the former Jedi's involvement with the Trade Federation, and it made the fight just that much more bitter. How was it possible that a man who had formally been one of the most renown Jedi Masters, had turned his back on their teachings so completely? To become a Dark Jedi and use his powers for chaos? It just didn't make sense, at least not to Obi-Wan.

What had exactly happened to the man, no one knew. Obi-Wan knew that there had been fear of Dooku turning completely to the Dark Side and becoming a Sith, but soon, Dooku had suddenly disappeared. Master Kit Fisto had, while on a mission on to the third moon of Vassek, found the mutilated body of the former Jedi some time later. Dooku had been decapitated. His heart had also obviously been ripped out of his chest, and his insides look as though they had exploded. He had met a gruesome end, and even though Obi-Wan still resented the man for turning his back on the Jedi, he couldn't help but pity the traitor. No one deserved to die the way he had.

As his mind went to darker thoughts, he was suddenly roused by a disturbance in the Force. Someone was coming. He leapt to his feet, anxiousness and excitement warring over him at the thought of meeting the Chosen One. But that joy met a swift and painful death the moment he realized that the disturbance was dark. Black.

Oh no!

As fast as he could, Obi-Wan ran out of the control room and towards the exit. He couldn't get trapped down here. He would never survive! He had to get out, get away. He had to warn the Chosen One!

But it was too late.

Just before he made it to the exit, a dark figure filled the doorway, blotting out the starlight and, indeed, escape. The snap-hiss of a lightsaber sounded, and the cave was now bathed in the terrifying glow of red, even as the hissing of a respirator filled the cavern. Obi-Wan's mouth went dry. He needed no introduction to this creature.

Grabbing his lightsaber, the Knight ignited his weapon and held a defensive posture, adding a blue glow to the room, clashing with the red. Even as terror threatened to consume him, Obi-Wan reached out to the Force, praying for its guidance, for its comfort. But he couldn't really feel anything other than the crushing darkness that exuded from the Sith. He couldn't even feel his master's presence anymore. He was alone.

"At last," the Sith's booming voice echoed slightly off the walls. "Another Jedi for me to dispel from the universe."

"You wish," Obi-Wan snapped, hoping his fear was not so evident to the Sith.

Slowly, Darth Vader, the Slayer of the Jedi, walked deeper into the cave, his heavy boots echoing all around. He was big. Bigger than Obi-Wan had thought. Stories of the terror in black had not done him justice. Or at least, Obi-Wan hadn't really believed everything he'd been told of the Sith. A grievous error on his behalf, he realized.

When Vader stood before him, Obi-Wan tensed and took a step back. He couldn't believe this was really happening. He'd been so hopeful only a short time ago, and now this. Could there ever truly be hope for the galaxy with the likes of Vader alive? He had barely escaped a Sith once ten years ago now, he didn't have much faith that he would do so again. Last time it had been due to blind luck, but it wouldn't happen this time. Already, without knowing what he did about this Sith, he could sense Vader's presence in the Force. Vader was much stronger than Maul had been. So much stronger.



Force help me, he thought, watching as the Sith regarded him as well. Master, forgive me. I've failed you. Again.

And without warning, Vader attacked. There was no indication, no hesitation. Somehow Obi-Wan was able to block the first blow, amazed at the speed at which the Sith had moved. He hadn't counted on that. He'd actually thought he'd have the advantage of agility, and maybe he did, but not by enough. Vader looked so heavy, but apparently looks were deceiving. Obi-Wan should have remembered that.

But what he did remember was that he could not beat Vader here, not like this. The Sith had the higher ground as the hanger was slanted downwards. He needed to get somewhere else, maybe to a place where it didn't matter who had what position. The old droid foundry! he thought, and after parrying another blow, took off at a dead run towards the door and farther into the base.

Obi-Wan was not fooled into thinking that he had surprised the Sith, or at least not for long. He gathered up what Force he could and sprinted as fast as he could. But even still, he could hear Vader give chase. Alarming, the Sith was gaining.

Turning a corner sharply to buy time, the Jedi's mind was racing, trying to come up with more of a plan to face the Sith. Despair threatened to overtake him, but he couldn't let that happen. Too much was at stake for him to fall. Yet, Vader had almost singlehandedly wiped out the entire Jedi Temple, what hope did Obi-Wan have against such a creature? Master, help me! he thought desperately, as he willed his mind to think of something.

It was obvious that Vader was not to be underestimated in anything. Apparently his respirator did not mean that he could not run, nor exert himself physically. This mad dash was proof of that. And apparently Vader was still quiet agile, even if there seemed to be just the slightest hindrance to his movement by the suit itself. In overall strength Obi-Wan knew he didn't stand a chance. He'd heard about Vader's fighting style, had seen it from records at the Jedi Temple. The Sith's main strategy was to simply overwhelm his opponents before he crushed them. Brutal strength was his ally.

The Force screamed at Obi-Wan, and he turned around in time to block Vader's blade as the Sith had managed to catch up to him. As he'd just thought, the strength behind the blow was immense and set shockwaves of pain through the Jedi's arms, but he refused to dwell on it. Gridding his teeth, he prepared himself for a skirmish.

Vader did not bother to hold himself back. The hatred and darkness rolling off of this Sith was staggering. Never before had Obi-Wan felt such intense hate, not even from his last duel with a Sith. He had never even thought it possible that so much negativity could be built up side just one being before! How sad it must be to live such a life. How sad it must be to be this creature. Without his leave, Obi-Wan found himself pitying the creature attacking him.

He parried for several intense minutes, as Vader came at him again and again. The attacks were quick, precise, and devastating. One blow the Knight had barely been able to deflect, but it just caught his arm, cutting. He hissed in pain, but pushed it aside. Gathering up as much of the Force as he could, even as the Darkness was choking him, Obi-Wan Force pushed the Sith with all his might.

Vader barely budged, and hadn't even moved back a full meter, but it was all Obi-Wan needed. As fast as he could, he began sprinting for the droid foundry. Even though he knew he would probably not be any safer there than he was anywhere near Vader, it was all he could think to do. He would rather be remembered by the Sith as having put up some fight rather than just laying down and dying. He owed it to all the Jedi who had been before him, to his master, his padawan, and indeed, himself.

The moment he came to the doorway, the Force once more screamed at him, and without thinking, Obi-Wan somersaulted in the air, just missing Vader's blade, and landing roughly on the production line. Nothing worked in here anymore, the troopers that had attacked Geonosis years ago had been ordered to destroy everything, but the silence was to Obi-Wan's advantage. He could hear Vader coming, and there were plenty of places to hide, to leap and stay out of the way. Vader might be faster than he'd thought, but with that suit, Obi-Wan was just a tad faster. He would use that to his advantage.

When the conveyer shook, rattling, he knew the Sith had jumped down to join him. The Knight wasted no time in making his escape. His legs were screaming at him, his lungs burned, but still Obi-Wan pushed on. He'd never quite been so scared in his life. When he'd faced Darth Maul, that had been a terrible day, and he'd been so afraid, but determined. He'd gotten away with his master before Qui-Gon had succumbed to his wounds. When Kalin had died, and indeed all the other Jedi, Obi-Wan had felt almost numb at first before his world had shattered. But he'd survived, determined to retrieve his padawan's body, determined to find other survivors. Now, he wasn't sure he had anything else to live for, and this was one opponent that would show absolutely no mercy. This creature had crawled up out of hell to destroy him.

The Jedi looked back just in time to see Vader's lightsaber sailing towards him. He jumped out of the way, onto another still conveyer belt, once again getting a burn on his leg. It hurt, but it was not life threatening, so he pushed himself further.

There was something he had to live for, he realized when he spun around to block Vader's thrust towards his middle. The Chosen One. Qui-Gon had said that it was his duty to help the Chosen One, to train him, to defeat Vader. But how could he do that if Vader killed him? No, no, he had to live through this. He had to escape. The Chosen One was still on Geonosis somewhere and no doubt once the Sith was done with him, he would go after the other.

Blocking, parrying, thrusting, Obi-Wan's hands were nothing but a blur. He wasn't sure he'd even moved so fast in his life, but he had to in order to contend with Vader. There were moments when he would get burned and nicked by the crimson blade, but the Jedi tried not to think about the pain. It would not help him, and he needed full concentration when it came to this black monster.

When Vader suddenly kicked him in the stomach, Obi-Wan was knocked off his feet and sent flying backwards. He had only a moment to regain his sense and breath before the Sith was all over him again. Somehow, even Obi-Wan didn't know, he managed to get back to his feet and jump backwards just as the Sith stabbed downwards for the fatal blow.

Unable to contain himself, to stop the anguish, the young Jedi cried out, "Why?" His plea echoed across the foundry, bouncing off the rusting machinery.

Vader didn't stop his attack, and continued pressing Obi-Wan until he nearly out of room to run. He was being cornered, but could do nothing about it. It was very likely he would die here. Vader knew that. But he still couldn't find it in him to give up.

Lashing out as fast as he could, Obi-Wan made his first offensive move in the duel and managed to make the Sith take a step back. Then, using the Force, leapt once more into the air, up and away from the Sith. The moment his feet hit the ground, he was running. But he didn't get far.

Something hit him from behind. Hard. Obi-Wan was nearly knocked off his feet, and pain exploded in his back, but he staggered forward. Then again, something hit him, knocking into his head, and this time, the Jedi did lose his balance.

Laying panting, wheezing, head spinning, Obi-Wan groaned in agony, but couldn't bring himself to move just yet. When he finally thought he could, he managed to pick his head up to see Vader slowly advancing towards him. He'd thrown machinery at him, knocking him off his feet. But it couldn't end like this.

Pushing himself up, Obi-Wan got to his feet, and raised his saber, amazed and pleased that he'd managed to keep hold of it. Vader was still calmly approaching, taking his time. It was unnerving, but apparently the Sith knew as well that his prey could not get away from him. There was no need to hurry. Obi-Wan was doomed.

It was his final stand, he knew, but the young Jedi hoped to make it worthwhile. He was no coward and he would show Darth Vader that as well. Not that he thought it would make a difference to the creature. So it was that the Sith brought his lightsaber down with all his might, Obi-Wan meeting it in a block. But it was his final act. The moment their 'sabers met, Obi-Wan felt his arm give, the bone splintering.

Crying out in agony, the Jedi felt to his knees, his lightsaber clattering to the ground. He looked up into the pitiless mask of the Sith Lord, and couldn't help the sorrow that enveloped him. He'd failed. Again. Why had he even bothered to hope? He'd let everyone down yet again.

"Why?" he whispered again, cradling his arm to his chest, not bothering to try and get away while the Sith stood over him.

"Because you deserve to die," Vader replied calmly, kicking the Jedi's lightsaber away.

Tears burned in Obi-Wan's eyes as he shook his head in confusion. "But why?" he gasped. "What have we ever done?"

"You exist," the Sith said emotionlessly. "That is enough."

"But... But why?" He was going into shock, and his mind simply could not wrap itself around why this was happening to him. How could anyone be so merciless?

It was a wonder that Vader was even humoring him at all. But there was more to all this than simple hate. Obi-Wan could feel it. "Because of what you've done to me!" the creature snarled.

"I... we've never done anything to you," the Knight stammered, flinching at the hatred wafting off the Sith. "We never even knew you existed until your attack on the Jedi Temple!"

Now it was Vader's turn to be surprised. Obi-Wan wasn't sure how he knew, but he did. "Lies!" Vader spat, swinging his lightsaber down to end his prey. But somehow, even injured as he was, the Jedi managed to roll out of the way just in time, and called his lightsaber to his good hand.

"It's true!" he cried. "Whatever happened to you, it wasn't the Jedi!" Even though he still didn't understand what Vader meant, Obi-Wan knew that this might be what he needed to buy time.

"It was a Jedi that tried to kill me!" Vader roared, not in the mood to listen, but the other knew he had to keep going.

"No! Not before you killed all those at the Temple!" He staggered backwards helplessly, even as Vader stalked forward furiously. "It would have been public information, a warning to all Jedi, if they'd discovered another Sith!"

"Shut up!" the creature snapped. "You're lying! I know Dooku was a Jedi!"

Suddenly everything clicked together, and Obi-Wan could see the pieces of a horrible, nightmarish puzzle beginning to fit together. "No," she shook his head again, now pressed up against a wall. "No, Dooku was dispelled from the Jedi Order nearly eight years ago."

For the first time since being introduced to the Sith, Vader paused. Whatever the reason, hearing this was of great importance to him, and even though Obi-Wan was not entirely sure why, he knew that whatever he said would change the course of fate. "Lies," Vader hissed, his voice low.

Obi-Wan felt his throat tighten and close shut, but struggled on. "It's true!" he gasped. "Count Dooku... left eight years... ago. He... he be-trayed the Je... Jedi."

"No, you're lying!" Vader screamed.

"Am... not," the Knight fought against the Force choke, the edges of his vision turning black. "Left... A Dark... Jedi or... a... Sith."

"NO!"

Pieces of equipment went flying about the room in Vader's rage. The hatred coming from the Sith redoubled and almost became visible. Never before had Obi-Wan witnessed such an awe-inspiring sight. A horribly fascinating sight. The whole room was in motion, surging and flying at Vader's uncontrolled power. The Jedi had never believed such power could even exist in one being.

"NO!" he screamed again.

Just when the Knight felt his eyes start to roll back in his head, he found himself on his knees, and gasping in air. Vader had... let him go? After several minutes of coughing, sputtering for air, Obi-Wan finally managed to look up.

Vader was just standing there, hands balled up into fists as everything around him was spinning out of control, smashing into walls, machinery, other pieces of floating debris. Something was happening within the Sith. There was a moment when he almost believed he felt... Light.

But that was impossible! Darth Vader was wholly and completely a creature of Darkness! Yet even in his weakened and beaten state, Obi-Wan could feel a slim essence of Light emanating from the creature before him. It was battling the Darkness. So much chaos swirled around and within the Sith, that it overwhelmed the kneeling Jedi. So much cacophonous confusion. It was truly a wonder the wretched creature hadn't been torn apart.

And then the monster before him did something Obi-Wan would have never expected: he fell. With a resounding thud, Vader fell to his knees. Large, gauntleted hands reached up and grabbed at the side of his helmeted head. His head began shaking, almost as if in denial. What was happening here? What was wrong with this creature of Darkness? He was in pain. Darth Vader was in great and terrible pain.

Against all logic, Obi-Wan felt compassion for the thing before him. All of the old masters had said that the Dark Side was a path to suffering. Never before had the young Jedi seen it so acutely in any creature as he did that moment with Vader. What sort of torture had this being been through? How horribly twisted had he become because of the Dark Side?

For a moment, the two sat near one another, the Jedi and the Sith, one injured physically, the other mentally. Even though he was wary, Obi-Wan knew that there was more to this than just his fight, just his words. Something had been stewing in this creature for some time and had finally broken.

"Get out."

The low words were nearly inaudible, but they drew the Knight's attention instantly. Had he heard correctly? He didn't make a move, however.

That was a mistake. Lightsaber suddenly ignited once more, Vader made a sloppy, desperate slash towards him. The Jedi rolled away on instinct and was on his feet. He nearly fell again, as pain radiated through him. But he did not dare. The room was still a war zone, objects being tossed across the room by the Force, even as Vader sat on his knees.

"GET OUT!" the Sith bellowed.

So much pain and confusion in his voice, it nearly broke Obi-Wan's heart. But he didn't dare disobey. This was his chance and he had to take it. As fast as he was able, cradling his broken arm, the Jedi ran for his life, out of the factory and to his ship. Within minutes, he was away.

He sat back in absolute shock. He had survived an encounter with Darth Vader. He had to contact the others.

## 20. Hidden Truths

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There were some real advantages to having lived nearly nine-hundred years, but more recently, Yoda was finding that coming from a race of such long-lived peoples was more of a curse. True, he'd seen the rise and splendor of the Jedi, had seen more remarkable things in his life than perhaps any other being left in the galaxy, and made more friends than anyone could possibly imagine. But such longevity worked two ways. He also saw horrible, horrible things. Especially with his life as a Jedi, he'd seen wars, plagues, famine, corruption, and enslavement. He'd had to sit by and watched friends suffer, die, become twisted beyond recognition. Through it all, however, he'd taken it in stride, trusting in the Force.

Until several years ago. The destruction of the Jedi Temple was something that he had neither foreseen, nor indeed thought possible. He had helped build up the Temple, and been with it from its infancy in the jungle to its rise and splendor in the technological jungle that was now Coruscant. For hundreds of years he'd watched some of the most powerful people in the galaxy come to power and then witness their light fade into the Force. He'd been padawan, friend, and master to so many, he had almost become indistinguishable from the Jedi Temple itself. Its destruction...

It had wounded Yoda more than anything else ever had, even after nearly nine-hundred years of life. All the lives extinguished for no reason. At one point, he believed learning of his former padawan's betrayal of the Republic and turning to the Dark Side would be his deepest wound of this century. How wrong he was. How very, very wrong.

The attack was unexpected, and its commander even more so. Yoda had not been at the Temple at the time, but he'd felt everything going on, had felt the galaxy-wide slaughter of his kin in the Force. It was as though the Darkness had so suddenly fallen on everything in that moment, crashing down on the galaxy with such completeness that it was hard to image there ever being light again. And it was all because of Darth Vader.

Never before had Yoda felt of such a powerful being, not even after his long life. He had watched many Sith come into the world, but they had all be defeated one way or another, all squabbling for power. But it appeared it was not so with Sidious and Vader. The two had been quiet, deceitful, and cruelly efficient. The Grand Master had never quite heard of Sith working together so well before. Apparently Sidious had learned the art of effective padawan-training since the two that he'd had that Yoda had heard of appeared completely loyal. The thought was terrifying.

Sidious was the master mind in all of this, the instigator. It was bad enough to know that the Jedi had all been deceived by who they had believed was a mere senator from Naboo. The plans of the Sith that Yoda now saw in hindsight were brilliant. They had been set up so perfectly, it was as easy as fitting the final pieces into a puzzle. He had been patient, watchful, and ever opportunistic, even twisting Dooku in order to gain information from the Jedi.

But Sidious could never have succeeded, especially in the plot to destroy the Jedi, without his apprentice. But where the older Sith was hard to understand, and his history was obscure, though traceable, Vader's was nonexistent. The part of the brilliance of the Sith plot was its

unexpectedness, and Darth Vader was certainly unexpected. Even nearly on the Outer Rim, Vader's presence in the Force was strong. Very strong. He was like a beacon of death, casting a shadow of hopelessness on everything. Where his master was cunning, Vader was a juggernaut that utterly crushed all in his path. It had been Vader to destroy the Jedi, even if it was his master's plan, and it would be Vader who destroyed the Emperor and took control of the galaxy, for that was the Sith way.

Yoda feared when that day would come. He had meditated long on the subject of the creature that had come to be beside the Emperor and nothing he'd concluded was good. Vader was strong in the Force, probably even more than Yoda could tell, since he could only sense him from a distance. But the other Sith radiated raw power and potential, even now. It was this that scared Yoda. Even after destroying the Jedi, there seemed to be yet more greatness awaiting Vader. Truly frightening indeed.

But recently, the ancient Jedi had been getting strange disturbances in the Force. The worst being the night Obi-Wan had called Bail Organa to meet him. This frightened the green master as well. Obi-Wan was among the last of the Jedi left in the galaxy. Bail had said Obi-Wan did not look well, which was a cause of concern. Connecting the other Jedi's sudden call with the Force explosion he'd felt... Yes, it was certainly a cause for concern.

Something strange and powerful was happening in the Force now. It had been subtle, so subtle that Yoda had only been made aware of it several weeks ago, but it had slowly trickled into an explosion. The Light was fighting back. It made little sense to the Grand Master, but it was, even without the help of the Jedi. There was something very powerful pushing against the Darkness, and even though the galaxy was still shrouded in Darkness, there was still Light. There was still something fighting the evil in the world. It was almost too painful to hope. He doubted that either Vader or the Emperor would allow this Light to continue.

"We're almost to Mimban," Bail announced, taking the old Jedi from his thoughts. "Obi-Wan is also approaching."

"Hmm," Yoda hummed in thought, reaching out with the Force to the other Jedi. "Hurt, he is. Medical attention he will require."

The senator nodded. "I've already got my best healer standing by, and the medical droids are on and waiting."

It was good to have Bail here. The young senator had done more than his fair share of work for the rebellion and the remaining Jedi. Without Bail Organa, Yoda wasn't sure that the rebellion would be half of what it was. He was running a terrible risk, but the human was brave and did not back down, even when fear was evident in him. Truly, had he been Force-sensitive, Organa would have made a fine Jedi.

The pilot announced that Obi-Wan's ship had been brought on board, and when it was secure, they felt the jump to lightspeed again. It was dangerous to stay in one place too long, but Mimban especially since the Empire had a mining colony there. It had been rather foolish, but it was the closest planet half way between Alderaan and Geonosis to pick up Obi-Wan. They didn't dare trust anyone else with the Knight's care.

And so after waiting in the medical bay for several minutes, not wanting to be in the way when they brought the younger Jedi in, the doors burst open with several men carrying Obi-

Wan in on a stretcher, while the healer hovered over him, calling out orders. Immediately, the droids leapt to life and went to work. Yoda and Bail stood back, watching. With a quick scan of the Force, Yoda knew that Obi-Wan was not in a life-threatening condition. He was perhaps feverish, but was not going to die from whatever happened to him.

Unable to stay put, Yoda hopped onto the bed next to his former student, and gazed down dejectedly at the young man. Truly, Obi-Wan was too young to have all the heartache he now carried with him. Sadly, the small, green hand brushed the stray blonde hair out of the Knight's face, glad, at least, that Qui-Gon wasn't here to see how poorly his former apprentice looked. Qui-Gon had always been rather protective of Obi-Wan, and usually frightened the medical staff into giving his padawan the best care possible. All healers had dreaded when Obi-Wan was injured, because his master would no doubt come to terrorize them all.

A fond memory. In these dark times, it was easier to live through it by remembering the good. It helped him see the positivity in the moment. Obi-Wan was alive now and in good hands. That was all that mattered.

Cloudy blue-grey eyes snapped open, startling the old master for a moment. He had not thought the younger Jedi conscious. "Master," he croaked, trying to sit up.

"Lay back down!" the healer snapped. "You're in no shape to be sitting up just yet."

Obi-Wan frowned, looking about him, before his eyes fell on Bail. "You came?"

"Of course, my friend," the senator smiled. "I would never abandon you."

The younger man smiled back in a delirious sort of fashion, before wincing. "I can't feel my arm."

"That's because it's broken," the healer explained as she and the droids finished applying bacta to the cuts and burns that littered the Jedi's body. "I can give you something for the pain now, but we'll have to operate. Soon."

The blonde nodded his head sluggishly, before meeting Yoda's eyes again. "Master," he said again, becoming more serious. "I have news from Geonosis."

It dismayed the old master that even now, so injured and in pain, that the young man had to think about duty before himself. Whatever happened to Obi-Wan had obviously been terrible, but the news he had brought no doubt valuable. It could be of the gravest importance that he be allowed to speak now, because one never knew how much time could be spent stalling. It was sad that they would have to question him now, lest they lose what precious time was left.

"Yes, Obi-Wan," Yoda nodded. "Speak."

"What happened to you?" Bail asked, pity ringing clear in his voice.

Obi-Wan sobered immediately, even as the healer could be heard preparing for surgery. "I dueled with Darth Vader."

The room fell into a shocked silence, even the healer pausing as she'd heard his words. While the Force rang with the truth of the situation, Yoda found he could not quite believe it. Vader? Obi-Wan had fought Vader? How was that possible? No Jedi had faced the Sith Lord



and made it out alive. The Force was swirling in agitation about him, and he knew that something important was going on here and in the greater galaxy.

“What?!” Bail was the first to come out of his stunned silence. “Obi-Wan, my friend, I think you’re still a little feverish —”

“No!” the Knight snapped, narrowing his eyes in frustration. “I fought him. I... It was...”

Confusion and pain over the memory haunted those usually bright eyes, and Yoda felt a stab of regret that this young man was once again so hurt. It was hard enough to have watched friends and loved ones die, but to survive it all, to be so hunted as they were... death was almost a kinder fate. It begged the question of how much they had to suffer before the Force was through with them.

“Survived an attack by Vader?” Yoda questioned, trying to keep his voice neutral.

“Yes,” the other Jedi nodded.

“How did you escape?” the senator asked, leaning forward.

A humorless smile came to Obi-Wan’s lips as he stared up at the ceiling. If the Force hadn’t told Yoda that the young man was still fully lucid, he might have thought the medication was clouding the Knight’s mind. “That’s the question, isn’t it?” He gave a sullen laugh. “He let me go.”

Again, the room when silent. “Vader?” Bail’s skepticism was quite clear.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan answered.

“Darth Vader? Dark Lord of the Sith? The Slayer of the Jedi? The Emperor’s Right hand? The creature that never leaves any Force-sensitive alive, Vader?”

While Yoda could understand the senator’s shock and cynicism, even shared it to a degree, it was not doing Obi-Wan any good to have these doubts thrown at him. “I’m not lying, Bail,” the Knight snapped. “He let me go.”

“But... But why?!”

The younger man turned his head away to stare up at the ceiling once more. Yoda could detect his confusion and fear, but more curiously, he could sense melancholy. Pity. Why would the young Jedi feel this way?

“Kenobi?” he said sternly, catching the other Jedi’s attention with the command. “More to this than you have said. Tell your tale from the beginning you must.”

Obi-Wan appeared thoughtful, even hesitant, before he sighed. “Months ago I began picking up small changes in the Force.”

The green master nodded. “Contacted me, you did.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “And over a week ago, when I was scouting out another planet on Bail’s list, I was... visited by an old friend that told me I would meet someone very important to the rebellion, to the Jedi, and indeed the galaxy.”

The senator’s eyes brightened considerably. “Who?”

Again, it was strange to see Obi-Wan hesitate. Usually the young man was eager to give any and all information that he knew. Whatever it was he was thinking, Obi-Wan was either unsure of its truth or afraid he would be doubted. Yoda betted on the latter.

"The Chosen One," he finally admitted.

Bail frowned even as Yoda's eyes widened. The Chosen One? Could it be? The Force explosion that he'd felt... had it been in connection with the legendary Bringer of Balance?

"Who told you this?" Yoda pressed, a hope growing in him with alarming speed. He knew he shouldn't feel this way, but it was hard not to. After so much evil that had befallen the galaxy, it was certainly high time for good!

Taking a deep breath, the younger Jedi answered. "Master Qui-Gon."

Yoda flinched. "But... Master Jinn died ten years ago," the senator stated carefully.

"Yes," Obi-Wan said sadly. "But he came back as a Force Ghost to help me."

It was clear that the older human believed the pain had finally gotten to his friend, and his doubt and concern radiated about the room. But Yoda knew better. It was not unheard of, the possibility of a Force Ghost, but the green master had yet to have heard of anyone succeeding in it. Perhaps all of Qui-Gon's outrageous theories and beliefs were not all so farfetched as many had previously thought.

"What tell you, did Qui-Gon?"

Relief skittered around them as Obi-Wan realized he wasn't going to be dismissed. "He told me that the Chosen One was coming soon and would defeat the Emperor." He paused. "He also told me that I was to help him when it came time to defeat Vader. That... that the Chosen One could not defeat Vader alone."

Turning over the information in his head, the Grand Master nodded. A part of him was surprised that Qui-Gon had not come to him with this. Surely it would be prudent for the Grand Master of the Jedi Order to be involved with the training of the Chosen One? Or at least in guidance? But then, Qui-Gon had always been close to Obi-Wan, their connection had probably been why the former Jedi had been able to come back in the first place. The bond of master and apprentice could sometimes go beyond death.

"More to you he said?" Yoda pressed.

The blonde nodded. "He told me that on Geonosis I would meet the Chosen One." A bitter laugh escaped him again. "I went to meet one man, but met another. I failed, Master."

"No," Yoda said firmly, dismayed for his former pupil. "Fail, you did not. Come out stronger, you have."

Confusion once again wrapped itself around the Knight's mind as he thought of the events that had happened to him recently. It was obvious he had ideas about something, maybe even theories, but he was not sharing them. Maybe because he was concerned he was delirious from the pain?

"Master," he began slowly, even as the healer was now frowning at them, wanting to perform surgery. "There is something... terribly wrong with Vader."

Even as Bail looked hopeful, Yoda nodded gravely, sending encouragement to the other Jedi. “Wrong?”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan nodded as best as he could. ‘He... I only got away because he let me,’ he stressed again. “He could have, should have, killed me, Master. He had me cornered. He was standing over me, ready to kill... but didn’t. I didn’t even land a strike on him, but...”

“But?” he pressed gently. This memory was obviously hard for Obi-Wan to talk about, more so because of the confusion it brought to him. Even while Yoda was painfully curious, he did not want to push the Knight too far. This had to take time, even if time was something they didn’t really have.

“But, I think I did hurt him,” he said quietly. Again, there was a great wave of pity coming from Obi-Wan. It startled Yoda. Was he actually feeling sorry for Vader? The creature that had hurt them all so terribly? There was obviously more going on here than what met the eye.

“I asked him—even though I don’t know how I was able to ask him, as I would never do it now—I asked him why he was doing this... why he did this to the Jedi—” Yoda’s eyes grew large at his pupil’s audacity, and he could feel Bail’s surprise as well, but the younger man went on, “—and he told me that he did it because the Jedi hurt him.

“‘No,’ I told him. ‘We’ve never done anything to you. We didn’t even know you existed before.’ But he told me I was lying and that Count Dooku had hurt him.”

“Dooku?” Yoda was taken aback by hearing the name. Sorrow filled him at the thought of yet another aspect of his padawan’s betrayal.

“What? What does he have to do with anything?” Bail frowned.

“Sirs, I think I should really get him into the operating room now,” the healer stated forcefully. “This has to be dealt with quickly.”

“He thought Dooku was a Jedi,” Obi-Wan blurted, lifting his head so that he could look into Yoda’s eyes, as though he could make the other understand. “He didn’t know about Dooku. When I told him that Dooku betrayed the Order, he... didn’t take it well.”

“Lay back,” the healer gently pushed the blonde’s head down. “You need to rest.”

Yoda regarded the younger man thoughtfully, trying to understand why this was so relevant. What did this have to do with anything? Why would Vader care if Dooku had been Jedi or Sith? This was the lifestyle he’d chosen to live. Why would he care so long as he got his revenge? It didn’t make sense. Perhaps Sidious hid Dooku’s allegiances, but Vader should have expected such treachery. It was in his own nature as well to lie. It was the Sith way.

“So he let you go after that?” Bail frowned. “Just because you told him the truth?”

“Gentlemen. Please,” the healer snapped, as she began shooing them away from her patient.

Still desperate to make them understand, Obi-Wan sat up again, “He broke down!” he called. “He just... it was like... he shattered. It was like something finally snapped. He was so distraught he didn’t even want to finish me, he just wanted me gone. He—”

But by then the healer had managed to coral them out and shut the door in the faces of the former Grand Master of the Jedi Council and a noted Galactic Senator, as if they were nothing. On the inside, they could hear the woman all but yelling at Obi-Wan to lie back down and not move. Yoda had to wonder how she'd managed this long as a healer with such a terrible bedside manner. She left much to be desired.

As if reading his thoughts, Bail smiled humorlessly. "She's a pain, but she's the best. That's why I brought her."

The old Jedi snorted. "Impatient, she is."

"I suppose," the senator sighed in acknowledgement. "But what can you do? It's a safe bet she'd be the only one on board that could fix that arm of his."

"Troubling this is," Yoda murmured after a silence. "Meditate, I shall. Confusing and alarming Obi-Wan's report was."

The human nodded, "I agree. I'll see if I can get in touch with our contacts on Naboo. We should land there in several days' time." Yoda didn't respond but hobbled off to his chamber to think over what had happened.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to think of all the clues that had been left for him to figure out. The future was still very much clouded by the Dark Side, but there was still a small sliver of hope that burned within him at the mention of the Chosen One. Could it be? After one thousand years, the Chosen One had finally come into the galaxy? It was a heartening thought.

But one that didn't exactly make sense. Having made it to his room, Yoda went in and sat down near the window, watching the stars streak by. If the Chosen One was really coming forward, wouldn't Yoda have been able to feel it? He'd like to think that he would as his connection to the Force was certainly not weak. By why hadn't he? From what Obi-Wan had said, the Chosen One couldn't have been a child, could he? It was possible. It sounded as though the Chosen One needed training, but then he could also be an adult left untrained.

If he were an adult, then why hadn't he been brought to the Jedi's notice sooner? Maybe he'd come from an Outer Rim world? That would explain why Yoda wouldn't have felt him, and why he still didn't feel him if he was on Geonosis. But Obi-Wan's story brought so many more questions up than just this.

Yoda had felt a struggle between Darkness and Light. It made sense that this occurred around the time of Obi-Wan's presence on Geonosis. So did that mean the Chosen One had encountered and engaged Vader? Not when Obi-Wan had been there, at least, but perhaps after? But then, Obi-Wan had said Vader had, for whatever reason, broken down. If that were true, he would not have been able to engage anyone, at least not efficiently. There had been no sense of death, so at least he knew the Chosen One wasn't dead, but did that mean the Chosen One had lost his first encounter with the Sith? Assuming one happened?

Sighing, the ancient Jedi shook his head tiredly. He was missing something, some valuable piece of information that perhaps Obi-Wan could give clues to, but could not for the time being. There was something strange at work. Something was off. The balance was shifting, but it was hard to know where it would eventually settle.

One way or the other, however, Yoda knew that Darth Vader would be at the center of it all.

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It took longer for Padmé to come to terms with how she felt about what the Emperor had told her, and she'd come to the conclusion that she just didn't know how to feel. What the Emperor had said... well, it sounded all too much like Vader to be comfortable. Vader wasn't the sort of person that spoke all that much, and he definitely wasn't one to go out of his way to make anyone feel better. He was still the same, cruel bastard she'd met nearly half a year ago. He hadn't changed.

But that wasn't true. He had changed, at least a little. She'd seen a side of him that no one else probably ever had. A side that many probably didn't even know existed. In most cases, it actually didn't. But she still found herself doubting. Sure he'd done nice things for her. So what? That didn't mean he wasn't just biding his time waiting to kill her.

It hurt. It just all hurt. She should have known that this would happen, shouldn't have let herself get so personally invested in this creature! But she had. She'd started to care for him more than what she would have liked. Though it was hard not to when you were sleeping with the man, for Force sake! When he was with her like that, he was such a different person. It was like he was two totally different people! One was a terrible, cruel Sith Lord, the other... well, she still wasn't even sure what he was then, but he was different.

Staring out the window of her room, the young woman had to sigh, not bothering to do anything except watch the traffic outside. Even doing this, however, reminded her of watching it with him on the balcony the first time he'd left her to go on a mission. Or even when he drove her to and from work.

Snorting, she couldn't help the frustration that came over her at the thought. It seemed like everything reminded her of him. Especially this Force forsaken room! There were too many memories floating around here, too many feelings. Good feelings. Almost...

No. She couldn't do this to herself. She couldn't think of the times they'd shared together. What happened here was nothing more than business transactions. She'd made a deal, he'd accepted, he came to collect payment. It hurt so much to think of those moments like this, but what if it was true? He'd kissed her, but did that mean anything to him? Could it mean anything to him? Was it all just a ruse to get under her skin? Was this all some sort of elaborate plot to drive her mad?

But why would he let her talk to her friends? Why would he let her call her family? He had almost seemed... concerned when he'd left. She'd gotten the feeling that he didn't want to leave. No, that was not right. He'd been anxious, he'd wanted to get away, but he hadn't wanted to leave her. Or so it had felt at the time.

This could all still be a ruse. Why would the Emperor lie to her? He didn't have a reason. But then, it was possible that he had. She wouldn't put it past him. He'd lied to her for years before that, and to the entire galaxy. It was more than likely that he would try to deceive her in some way. But why? What would he gain from it?

Walking towards her bed, she fell face first into the softness, wondering what to do with herself. She was still so angry. So distraught. She's been so upset today that she'd worked herself up enough to throw up. It had happened before when she was a child, when she was excited over something. That all seemed so trivial compared to what had happened to her now.

A concerned beep brought her out of her self-pity. Sitting up, Padmé pushed her hair out of her eyes and looked over at R2, who was rocking back and forth. "What's wrong, Artoo?" she asked.

The little droid rolled over to the door and then signaled for her to follow. Reluctantly, she stood and made her way out feeling she had no choice but to follow. She had no idea what he could possibly have to show her that wasn't already in her room, but froze when she realized where they were going.

"Artoo!" she hissed. "Are you crazy? We can't go in there!"

The droid sent her a cocky sounding beep, before he plugged himself into the wall, opening the door within seconds and rolling inside. Padmé didn't follow, too nervous and frightened. This was crazy! This was nuts! She could not do this. But the curiosity was eating her alive. Looking back down the hallway, there was no one. Everything was still. So pushing aside her own drama and fears, she entered into Lord Vader's chambers.

What she saw both troubled her yet didn't surprise her. The room was large, overly so, with little in it. The floors were polished, shining black, and the walls were all black as well. There were no windows. It was almost completely empty save for a large white... something. She didn't even know what to call it. It was just a giant spherical object that looked like it could open up. Was that where he slept?

Walking further in, careful, afraid that there might be some sort of trap, she noticed that there were two doors on opposite ends of the room facing each other. The one she quickly discovered, was a 'fresher. It didn't look like it had ever been used. There were certainly no personal items left behind. Even the medicine cabinet was left empty. Did he use it? Had he ever?

Making her way back into the main section, she realized that in the wall seemed to be some sort of hidden door. Curious, she pressed it, and it immediately opened. Jumping back, she realized that it was a shelving unit of some sort, holding a variety of pads and pieces of electronics, old wires, and even droid gears. She put it back, not wanting to look through anything too extensively, even though she should. She should try and find any and all information she could for the Alliance. But she just didn't feel like it. Despite how angry and confused she was, this still felt like some sort of betrayal on her part. She wished she didn't feel this way.

On the other end of the room, she opened the door to find the control room. She ducked back quickly, before the droid inside could spot her, but an encouraging beep came from within. R2 was connected to the droid and obviously believed she was safe for the time being. Looking in again, she found the droid monitoring all the cams within the wing, and even a few in certain points in the base. So this was where Vader kept himself all the time. It was interesting, but she felt weird spying on everyone else, and so ducked back into the empty room.

With everything else explored, she turned her attention to the white sphere. What was it? Could it really be opened? Why did Vader keep it? There was no bed, so was this really where he slept? She was startled when it began to open, and looked down to see R2 plugged into a socket. Maybe this would help her understand. Maybe this was where Vader hid everything, even his humanity.

Brown eyes widened in hope and anticipation only to dim with disappointment. It was... a chair. A black leather chair surrounded by computers and screens. It was like a mini-command center of some sort. Just as cold and impersonal as everything else about the room.

Anger flooded through Padmé as she took it in. This was one of the richest men in the galaxy, did he own nothing? There were no pictures, no mementos, no nothing. Was he even human? She'd thought she'd felt flesh and blood, but now she wasn't so sure. There was nothing here. He was just as cold and heartless as the machines he surrounded himself with.

Maybe she'd been right before. Maybe there was nothing worth caring about in him. She was about to leave, to go drown in her sorrow, when something caught her eye. It was nothing huge, nothing major, but the slight discoloration in the nearly perfectly white sphere grabbed her attention.

Carefully stepping inside, Padmé was blasted with air, cold and crisp. It was cleaner, purer, she realized. Was this something to help him breathe? But her attention remained on the ivory colored piece of something near the main screen. It looked like a stone of some sort, and it was carved.

Picking it up, she ran it through her fingers, wondering at how smooth it was. It almost looked tribal, from a planet so far removed from the 'civilized' center. It was beautiful, and it saddened her to think that it was kept here with a man that had probably killed its owner. It deserved better than to be locked away with a creature that held no respect for it or its people.

With the stone in hand, she stepped out of the chamber and decided she'd had enough exploring. There was nothing here. It was all clean and neutral and completely inhuman. This was Vader's home, and it reflected him well. There was nothing, just as there was nothing in him. She'd been mistaken to think that she should care for him.

Turning, she made her way out, R2 beeping at her, as if calling for her to wait, but she couldn't. She couldn't stand to be in that place. It radiated his presence. So instead, she went to her room, sat down on her bed, examining the stone carved with crude shapes and symbols. On the back, she saw something written, so small it could have been mistaken for a blemish of the stone, but as she held it up to her eye, she realized it was a word: Shmi.

Briefly, she wondered what that meant, and where Vader had gotten such a thing. It at least took her mind off of the realization that the man she'd been sleeping with wasn't real.

## 21. Doubts

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Vader took a little longer to return to Coruscant than usual. The event of Geonosis had disturbed him greatly, and he had needed time to think and meditate, before returning to his master and... other things. He was so tired; he'd barely slept or eaten since his failed mission. His first failed mission. The shame of it burned, simmering into wild anger deep within his gut.

Sitting on the bed in his temporary chambers since there was no hyperbaric chamber, the young Sith tried to meditate. All he could think about, however, was what the Jedi had told him. Count Dooku had not been a Jedi when he'd attacked him. Dooku had turned on the Jedi. Had been a Dark Jedi or a Sith. The news should not have impacted him as much as it had. Who cares if he had been seeking revenge all these years and destroyed a group because of a slight misunderstanding? The Sith way was about death and hatred. The Jedi were his natural enemies.

So why did he feel so much... regret? It was like his entire world was falling apart right under his feet. One moment everything was fine, the next... the next he wasn't sure. Ever since sleeping with the senator, he'd had this terrible feeling of confusion that wouldn't leave him. One moment he was fine, everything was as it should be, but the next... the next it was horrible. He was second guessing himself, he was questioning his life, and worse, he was questioning his past.

Padmé had inspired something in him that he would have never thought possible. She had reawakened a part of him that he'd thought died out long, long ago, when he was just a child. Suddenly he cared about more than just himself and the Empire. Suddenly he longed to have the basic needs of life that his master had said were weaknesses. He wanted those weaknesses. He wanted to feel. He wanted... he wanted a choice.

But he couldn't have a choice. Not with the Emperor alive. Being with the senator had given him a taste of freedom, a freedom he didn't know he'd craved. She'd opened his eyes and his mind to other possibilities that he would have scoffed at months ago. But most disparagingly true of all was the simple fact that she'd given him hope.

Hope. Vader had not had that for many years. It had been beaten out of him as a very young child. In the beginning, he'd numbly waited for the day someone would come and rescue him, would deliver him from torment. It hadn't come. When he was older, he'd hope to escape on his own. It hadn't happened. When he grew into a teenager, he'd hoped he would overpower his master, and then there came the accident...

No, this new hope was not like the last he'd harbored. This hope that Padmé had kindled within him was a hope for something better, something that was not painful. It felt like the sort of hope he might have felt like before he'd been taken in by Sidious, when he'd been a child. True, he did not remember much of his time before the Sith, but he knew without a shadow of a doubt that even having been a slave, he'd been better off than he was now. He'd been happy. Like when he was with Padmé.



It was useless to resist, he had to admit it. He liked her. He was happy with her, even when she was annoying the hell out of him. Just being near her was... intoxicating. Especially right before he'd left. She gave him a peace unlike any he'd ever experienced before when he was with her. And while that peace never lasted long, and the world would come crashing back down on him, reminding him that life was hardly worth living, for just a few minutes, he was free.

But even the thought of her could not calm him at the moment. All he could do was sit brooding about what he'd learned from the Jedi. It really shouldn't bother him. His master lied to him all the time, nothing had changed. But it had. With even his tiniest tastes of freedom, it made Vader wonder just how much his master had lied to him about?

For nearly four years Vader had been trapped inside this life support suit, in pain and anger, all because of Count Dooku. His master had said Dooku was a Jedi and had to be destroyed. He'd done so, only at a great price.

Vader had been so young, inexperienced in fighting Jedi of any sort. His battle with Dooku could have been his last, and nearly had been when the kriffing man cut off his arm and stabbed him in the chest, puncturing his lung. There had been other flesh wounds as neither he nor Dooku had held back, but Vader had survived. The factory they had fought in had been toxic and hot, and they had been lucky neither had completely fallen into a pit of liquefied metal. Vader could just recall nearly falling in, but he'd by then, managed to get grip around Dooku's innards with the Force, and tore the man open before decapitating him. After that, he remembered little as he struggled to communicate with someone, barely managed to stay awake until they arrived. The next thing he could recall was being in surgery and waking up in this accursed suit.

He'd been given a list of all his injuries, but he couldn't quite remember getting any save the arm and the lung injury. Everything else had seemed so minor to him, but they apparently were more severe than he'd thought back then, especially his head wound from when Dooku had apparently slammed him into a boiling vat that had given him third degree burns after only a second or two of contact and cracked his skull. His master had come and saved his life, given him a new arm, and supplied a suit that would help him breathe and heal, saying that it would not be long before he could be rid of it. And like a fool, Vader had believed him, only have the satisfaction that he'd been able to kill the bastard that had done this to him.

It hadn't been enough, however. Never before had Vader fallen into a rage so completely. It was truly then that Darth Vader had been born, born because he'd had absolutely no hope left save in his master.

But what if he was wrong? Sidious had said it would take a while for his lungs and other injuries to properly heal. Vader even knew that his master liked him in the suit for the appearance it gave. It was intimidating and hid the fact that he was so young from the world and forced them to respect him. Yet even Vader, with his limited knowledge of healing, knew that he should not have had to be in this suit for so long. It made him wonder if his master had, for the first two years, been hindering his recovery? Even if just slightly? The last year he had taken over the medical droids himself, becoming impatient, and had recovered more rapidly. The burn to his head hadn't seemed so severe but he was actually growing his hair back, and his lungs were repaired now, thanks to the medical droids he'd programmed himself.

Now, the only reminder left of that horrible battle was his arm. His piece of shit arm. Even Vader knew the technology used for it had been outdated at the time it was attached to him, but he hadn't had much choice then. He had been glad to have something there. But now he knew that it hadn't even been surgically attached correctly. It hurt him, pinching the skin of his upper arm. Sometimes it bled, and the metal was so heavy. It had taken him months before his fighting style was back to peak efficiency, working with his new appendage as well as his other injuries.

In those months he'd festered in anger, sorrow, and rage. The attack on the Jedi Temple had been his release, the true revealing of Darth Vader. He hadn't held back and slaughtered anyone in his way. He'd never stopped to think about how easy it had been compared to his fight with Dooku. Thinking about it now, he recalled it had felt different. Vader had been so eager to destroy his first Jedi with Dooku that he hadn't realized that the other had been calling on the powers of the Dark Side. The other Jedi he'd fought had not. They had been just as desperate, but their attacks weren't quiet as... overwhelming as Dooku's had been. He'd never really pondered on it before, even though he'd had all the information. But now he knew the truth:

Dooku was a Dark Sider.

So what? Who cares if Dooku had been some sort of Dark Jedi or even a wannabe Sith Lord? Who cares if Dooku had actually been one of his master's old apprentices? Or if his master had pitted them against each other to see who was the strongest? Who cares? This was the Sith way. Vader had always planned on killing his master eventually and knew that there was a great possibility of his master plotting the same.

So why did this bother him as much as it did? Why was he still plagued with nightmares about the children he'd slaughtered? Why could he see the faces of all his victims? Why did it tear at his heart to think about two pairs of brown eyes staring at him in horror and revulsion?

Because he's not really gone, a voice whispered inside of his mind. The boy. He's the one who has nightmares. Not you. Neither you nor the Emperor have fully slain him.

"Impossible," Vader muttered. "The boy is dead."

No, the voice became stronger. No he's not. He's alive, and has been watching in silence all these years at the terror you've introduced into the galaxy. Watching but unable to speak.

"No," he hissed, shaking his head. This was just like back at the droid foundry with that Jedi! That infernal voice was whispering doubt to him. Making him question everything he'd ever done in his life. "Shut up, you're lying!" he snarled.

Search your feelings, it said more clearly this time. You know what I'm saying is true.

"But it's impossible! He's dead!"

He's not dead. At least not yet.

"How do you know?" Vader growled. "I've killed everyone else, why not him?"

Because I'm him. Vader sat up straighter, panic suddenly coursing through him. You haven't killed me. I've always been here. You just never wanted to see before.

This was not possible. This could not be happening. After years of training, years of work, he had not been able to rid himself of the disease that was his former self? He hadn't been able to kill a pathetic child? He began shaking, unable to stop himself. It was happening again. He couldn't breathe and he was having a panic attack as the guilt over everything he'd ever done came surging up from the bowels of his soul, out of the shadows now displayed for him in the light.

"Stop," he gasped. Already, what few objects there were in the room were floating. "Stop," he begged. He couldn't take it! Couldn't take this guilt.

Why? the voice asked pitilessly. Why should I spare you after you would not spare others? You did this to yourself, and you've damned me along with you.

Struggling, fumbling, Vader tore off his mask and helmet, trying to breathe before he ended up destroying more than just his room. It didn't help, however. He still felt his chest constrict and he couldn't stop the terror. All those innocent faces he'd destroyed came rushing before him, taunting him. He couldn't stop remembering how the Jedi children tried to run from him, a few trying to fight him in hopes that their friends could get away. Such selflessness at such a young age. But it hadn't stopped him. He'd crushed them the same as he had the adults. No mercy, no pity. Just thinking of it now chilled him to the bone.

How could he have done that? How could he have attacked those that hadn't done anything to him? And not just the Jedi, but everyone else? The planets he'd set waste to, the innocent he'd murdered simply because they were in his way? And for what purpose? To please his master, the man who had nearly ordered Vader's execution by the hand of Dooku?

Was he really bringing order to the galaxy? He used to think so, but now... now he didn't think so. He had created chaos in order to bring peace, but it did not work that way. He was beginning to see that now. Padmé had been right. She'd been right about everything.

Listen to her! the voice cried desperately. Let her help you! Let her help us.

"I... I can't," Vader whispered, though he felt a bit calmer. "No one can help us now. We're—"

It's not too late! the voice insisted. You didn't destroy me. You couldn't. There's hope! Cling to it! Cling to me!

Vader hesitated. He didn't like this. He didn't think he could do this. But the alternative was to allow himself to be eaten away with guilt and be unable to control himself. Maybe he could try. This wasn't a commitment, not yet. Perhaps he could play with the idea a while longer? Maybe there was hope for him yet. He would wait and see, but for now...

Now he had to turn his mind towards business. Even after lengthy meditations and staying up to debate with himself, he could sense that they had arrived back to Coruscant. Immediately his mind opened up his impenetrable shielding and stretched out to the senator. She was still there and safe. Checking on his master, the Emperor seemed to be the same as always, though Vader didn't trust this brief assessment. Just when he'd left Coruscant for his failed mission, and even sometimes later, he could feel his master trying to break through his shields, probing. It hadn't exactly felt direct, but it had been annoying, and unneeded.

He didn't know what that was all about, not exactly. His master had been suspicious of him lately, but why would he try to probe his mind when he was so far away? What faith did he have of success? It didn't make sense, but it told Vader one thing: It told him that he would not be seeing his master tonight.

After a quick calculation, the Sith knew that it was late in the evening on Coruscant. His master didn't sleep, but Vader would wait for his report until the morning. Right now he was exhausted, and he just wanted to go back to his own room for peace. He didn't want to think anymore.

Just as he was about to walk out after putting on his helmet and mask, the door chimed. Frowning, Vader opened it and found himself met with an unexpected familiar face. It was the young cadet that had been sent to him on Despayre to inform him of Captain Oquier. He'd forgotten since his attack on the Jedi that this was the same ship as the last time. The commanding officers must have been sent this one because he'd actually come back alive the last time he'd delivered information. The sacrificial lamb, so to speak.

"Sir," the cadet snapped to attention, his face the picture of composure. "My apologies for interrupting you, Sir, but we'll be docking over Coruscant in several minutes."

The cadet looked only slightly younger than Vader himself, and for some reason, perhaps due to exhaustion, the Sith found himself studying the young man, wanting to know more. This man gave off an aura of control and respect. Vader liked that. "What is your name, Cadet?" he asked.

The young man's emotions spiked in fear, but it did not show on his face. At all. Truly he was disciplined. "Sir, Cadet Firmus Piett, Sir!"

Piett. He would have to remember that. Maybe he would get the young man transferred to work with his staff. There was such potential radiating off of this one, it would be a waste should anything happen to him. "Very well, Cadet Piett," Vader nodded, before turning and walking away, not bothering to wait for the obviously relieved young man.

When he got to the hanger bay and piloted a shuttle down through the traffic and into his own hanger, Vader had never felt more relieved in his life. Even though he knew it would solve nothing, he leaned back in his chair, sighing, letting his head fall back against the headrest not wanting to get out. He didn't want to have to face the world. Not yet. When he went out there he would have to be confronted with responsibilities he had, with the guilt of all he'd done and what he had yet to do. Here in the shuttle, when he flew, he was safe. It was the only time he was free. Other than when he was with the senator. But she was part of his confusion, and he just wanted to be away from everyone and rest.

But he was only stalling the inevitable and that would not do. Vader was many things, but a coward was not one of them. So, blocking out everything, he disembarked from the shuttle, hoping that perhaps his confusing, traitorous thoughts might leave him when he was safely secured in his chambers. When he looked out, however, he knew that that anything resembling calm would not come to him this night.

Waiting at the bottom of the ramp was the Storm Trooper that he had assigned to Senator Amidala. It was late at night and this one should have been off shift hours ago. If the clone was here now, it meant that something had happened. Something bad.

“Trooper!” he barked, waiting for an explanation he dreaded to hear.

“Sir!” the trooper came to attention. “I feel it is my duty to inform you of all that has happened here with the senator in your absence.”

Before, such things were handled with a simple report informing him of everything the senator had done and who she had talked to that went to him and no one else. Not once had the trooper decided to personally deliver the report. “And?” he prompted, getting a sick feeling in his stomach.

“Sir, the day you left Coruscant, the senator was called to an audience with the Emperor.”

The planet seemed to stop turning. The sick feeling Vader had intensified at the thought, and he was just able to breathe around the tightening of his throat. Without a second thought, he turned away from the trooper and all but ran to the lift, determined to see Padmé for himself. The trooper was right behind him.

As they were weaving through the hall, his P.A. came over to him. “Sir, a moment if you will.”

Vader didn’t stop. He might have strangled the man had he not been so panicked. He couldn’t concentrate on the Force for such a thing. But his silence and continuation in life must have encouraged the lieutenant. “Sir, it’s about the senator.”

“I know she was summoned,” he snapped, anxiety not leaving him.

“It’s not just about that, Sir,” the Lieutenant said, finally capturing the Sith’s attention. “I don’t think she’s... well, Sir.”

“What?” Vader halted so abruptly, the trooper nearly ran into him. “What do you mean? What’s wrong with her?” he demanded.

“She won’t tell me, Sir,” his assistant looked just about as worried and distressed as Vader felt. He had the luxury of being able to show it. “She hasn’t been eating dinner regularly, and she won’t speak to me.”

“She’s also only eaten lunch when I’ve forced her to, Sir,” the trooper added.

That was enough. Vader had taken all he could take without succumbing to yet another panic attack. Without the other two, he charged off towards his personal wing, a million different scenarios popping into his head. What had the Emperor talked to her about? What had he done to her? The younger Sith knew very well that his master could torture without leaving a mark, and he was certain the trooper and assistant would have picked up on anything had it been visible. Reaching out with his mind, he brushed hers. She was deeply distressed, yet strangely numb. He hadn’t had time to concentrate on her before, but he cursed himself for not doing so now. What had the Emperor found out?

He didn’t recall walking across the hallway, but he came back to himself when he tore open her door using the Force in his urgency. She jumped up from the bed, wrapped in her robe, brown eyes wide in surprise. But the moment she saw him, it was not the warm smile that had seen him off with. No, it was a terrible scowl and a deep sense of hatred. It turned Vader cold.

“What did he say to you?” he demanded, not caring that she could hear panic in his voice.

"Get out of my room," she snapped, narrowing her eyes at him as she pointed a finger out the door.

Those words, her feelings, were as good as a slap to the face. How? How could this woman who had given him such warm smiles, had kissed him the way she had, be like this? He had thought she cared about him. She had cared about him. But now, after only being gone a little over a week, she had turned against him.

"What did he say?" Vader took a threatening step closer to her, covering his hurt with anger.

"I said get out!" she yelled, taking several steps back, her eyes filling with angry tears. "I don't want to see you again."

Another stab to his already wounded soul. "You forget your place, Senator!" he roared, unable to stop himself. "This is my home! You have no authority here!"

"Fine!" she screamed, actually losing her temper with him. 'Fine, just kill me then!' tears threatened to spill but they did not. "Kill me now and save us both the trouble! Kill me just like you have everyone else!"

"STOP!" he bellowed, objects around her room shaking dangerously. No. He could not lose his temper like this, not with her. However she was reacting was because of the Emperor. It just had to be. He refused to be the one to make matters worse. For once, he listened to the voice of the little boy he'd long ago left behind. 'Stop,' he took several deep breathes, reigning in his temper. "I'm not going to kill you. That would defeat the purpose of my assignment."

"Your assignment," she snorted, it almost sounding like a sob. "Oh yes, your terribly important assignment to watch me. I know all about that."

"You do," he nodded warily, not understanding her reaction. He wanted to reach out with his mind, but was afraid that she would sense him and become more distressed. He didn't want to hurt her, even if she was hurting him. "What did the Emperor tell you?"

"Nothing that wasn't true," she spat bitterly, turning away from him. "Just confirming everything I knew about you."

She wasn't making this easy for him. After such a stressful week, after all he'd been through, he was just so tired. He hadn't expected or wanted to deal with an infuriated woman right now. Whatever the Emperor had said to her, had told her about him didn't matter. She had believed it and maybe it was all true and for the best. But that was not his concern for the time being. Right now, that was not what mattered. Misperceptions could be fixed later. Right now his main concern had to be her. She had been left alone, vulnerable to a Sith Master's mind probes. He had to find out what she might have accidentally informed his master of or given away.

"Senator," he began again once he was sure his temper wouldn't get the better of him. "What did the Emperor find out from your mind? Did he try to penetrate your mind?"

A fierce glare was his only answer for several moments before she finally crossed her arms and looked straight at him. "Why don't you ask him yourself? Or are you afraid that you'll get in trouble because of what we've done together?"

Infuriating woman! Could she not see that he was trying to understand? To help her? Why was she acting this way? He had not seen her this aggressive since she'd first moved here, and even then she'd been afraid of him to go push too far. Apparently that fear was gone and left with indifference. Trying to glean what he could of all this, he figured that whatever she and the Emperor had discussed had really hurt her, shaken her so that she had some sort of skewed perception of him. She had lost her fear and either she was tired of all of this and was bold enough to stand up to him and his wrath or she had given up and just didn't care what he did to her. The latter utterly terrified him. To have her spirit so wounded... It was not to be borne!

If only he could just enter into her mind and see for himself! But again, the idea was met with resistance from that other part of himself. He didn't dare invade her mind as he would likely destroy it in his panic. He was not good at being subtle, and was surprised that the link he'd made with her before hadn't been discovered yet or overwhelmed her. He could not bear to be the cause of her ruination. Not anymore.

"I ask you because should he find out what we've done together, there is very great danger to you and myself," he explained as calmly as possible, though his voice sounded tight. His control was wavering. Hopefully she would see reason. "Should he find out what has transpired between us, he will likely have you killed."

Her eyes hardened and it hurt to see. "Why would you care if that happened? I'm just some sort of stress relief for you. What do I matter? You could always find another woman to fuck."

Such callousness! Such cynicism had never been heard from her before. Not even when she was first brought here. The brightness that was her aura in the Force was so much dimmer now, and it caused him alarm. She could not be so tainted by this darkness, not her! What had he done? Why was this happening! She was the only thing left in his miserable life that held any real value to him and he was slowly corrupting her, just like everything else.

"No," his voice dropped lower, as if he were speaking to a child. It grabbed her attention instantly. "There will be no other after you. Not ever again."

He was a Sith Lord, and Sith Lords were not meant to have such feelings as this. But lately, he wondered if he could still retain that title as he felt... so much. He was trying, trying to understand this newness of light in his life, trying to adapt and adjust to it, but it was hard. It was slow. It was tearing him apart, but he still had such a long way to go if he even wanted to turn back from the path he was on. That part of him that had remained hidden for so long was whispering encouragement, even as the greater part of his mind felt doubt.

Padmé seemed shocked by his revelation, and actually faltered in her aggressive stance. To hear him say such things must have been as much of a shock to her as it was to him. But she was no longer glaring, and he found his chest didn't feel so tight because of it.

But it was a short lived hope. Almost as if realizing the mistake of letting her guard down, she became flustered and defensive again. "Like I could ever believe that," she snapped.

"If you searched your feelings, you know that it is true." He couldn't tell her more. It wasn't in him. He had to hope she understood what he meant, what he wasn't saying, even if he was a little uncertain himself.

Again, she seemed surprised, but she recovered much faster this time. “Stop lying to me,” her voice cracked. ‘Stop torturing me like this.’ She was pleading now. “Just... just go ahead and kill me. It would be a kindness compared to this.”

Vader panicked. “I can’t kill you!” Force, could she not understand? Did she not know the powers she held over him?

“Why?!” she cried. “I’m tired of waiting around for you to do it! I’m tired of being played with. Just kill me.”

Why wouldn’t she understand? “I can’t!”

“Because your master said so?” she spat. “You really are just a pathetic slave, aren’t you?”

Silence.

That was it. That was the breaking point for Vader. He’d fought so hard, but he could not handle that. Not from her, not from anyone. Everything glass in the room shattered as he lost control. Not even the senator’s startled cry cooled his rage. Too far, she’d gone too far this time! She was rubbing salt into a wound that never healed and it enraged him. He couldn’t see straight, couldn’t breathe. All he wanted to do was kill, to destroy, to end the one who had caused him to feel this pain.

Reaching out to the Force, he gathered it around himself, harnessing its power. The Darkness eagerly came to his call. Glaring down at the tiny woman, he raised his hand, intent on choking the life out of her. She wanted to die so badly? Fine! He would make her suffer just as much as she had made him suffer!

But just when he had her right where he wanted, he paused. Brown eyes were staring up at him in utter terror from down on her knees. The sound of the glass exploding must have startled her into dropping down to protecting herself. He could see her mind clearly now, not caring if she knew he was there. He suddenly saw her encounter with the Emperor, his master trying to penetrate her mind, but failing, something not quite her own protecting her. Her confusion and hurt at Vader, her belief of his betrayal. Her sorrow...

He couldn’t do it. Lowing her hand, swallowing his dark intent, Vader repressed his anger as much as he could. The effort was tremendous and his whole body shook with the effort to control himself. It took several minutes before he was able to see clearly again, to move past the rage. For the first time that he could remember, he let go of it, giving it to the Force. He didn’t want it. And now all he was left with was his own sorrow and guilt over what had happened and what had almost happened.

She wanted him out? Fine. He would leave her alone. His only intent in coming here had been to see if she was hurt. She wasn’t, not really. He’d wanted to know if she’d told the Emperor anything, she hadn’t. Now he was just overstaying his welcome. He would leave her in peace.

When he made it to the door, he could hear her get up, the glass shifting about her. She would have to change rooms until the glass was repaired, he realized, but he would send C-3PO to deal with that later. Turning around, he regarded her and her shaken, shocked expression. He should leave, but he couldn’t just yet.



“What the Emperor said to you was probably true,” he acknowledge, watching as she snapped her attention to him. “But not in the way you think.”

With that parting wisdom, he left, intent on meditation and rest. He certainly needed it before he faced the day tomorrow.

## 22. Guide

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Padmé Amidala was an extremely lucky woman. There was just no denying that luck had always been on her side. She'd been born into a well-off, loving family that she adored more than anything, had a successful career as both a queen and senator, and more recently, she had survived her last encounter with Lord Vader. When he had been here the night before, shattered all the windows and everything else after she'd called him a slave to his face, somehow, against all probability, he had let her live. She'd seen the way he raised his hand to end her life, had felt the room swirl with a darkness so thick, it had been hard to breathe. But he'd let her live.

None of this made any sense, and Padmé had had her doubts before, but now... How was she supposed to feel? The hatred coming from him had been astonishing, but he'd controlled himself. She'd seen it. It had been fascinating to watch as he physically controlled himself. It almost appeared as though she actually saw physical shadows being pulled into Vader and then exuded out again as a sort of light mist. And then he had left. Left her alive.

Why? Again, the troubling thoughts tumbled around in the senator's head as she thought about everything she knew about the Sith Lord she lived with. He was impatient, a murder, cruel, evil, and uncompromising. But these things didn't apply when he was with her. When it was just the two of them together he showed a tremendous amount of patience, spared her, was kind, considerate even, and bent enough to make deals. There were two totally different sides to Lord Vader, and the more she thought about it, the more her head hurt.

Rolling over in the bed to one of the other guest rooms she was staying in until the windows were replaced, Padmé stared up at the ceiling. It was Saturday morning, and far too early for her to be awake. But her mind wouldn't stop thinking. Wouldn't stop replaying her encounter with Vader the previous evening.

Blocking off her emotions, trying to look at everything objectively, Padmé realized that Vader had come to her in worry. He'd been worried about her. Somehow he'd heard about her meeting with the Emperor and had rushed to see her. Force, he hadn't even been patient enough to wait for the doors to slide open on their own! While he had been demanding, as usual, there was concern in his voice when he'd spoken to her. Concern. Really? It didn't seem possible, she tried to push the thought away, but she couldn't. She had to keep being objective.

Thinking back to their exchange, Padmé couldn't help but cringe as she thought about all she'd said, how she'd acted. She'd completely lost it with him. She hadn't been ready to even look at him again let alone confront him. It had been so unexpected to have him suddenly in her room she hadn't thought, just reacted. Looking back on it, she was very lucky that it hadn't cost her, her life.

Again, it was amazing how patient Vader had been trying to be. For a man that didn't practice temperance when it came to his anger, he had done remarkably well. While he still remained demanding, it was considerably milder than he would have been with anyone else. Yes, he had truly been concerned for her.

Doubt tried to rear its ugly head and whispered that he was only worried about himself, that he didn't want to get into trouble with his master, but that didn't feel right. If he was afraid of that, he would have been more aggressive with her. If he had truly been looking out for himself, he would have invaded her mind and got what he'd wanted and left. And then, he wouldn't have reacted so strongly to her telling him to kill her.

That had been very stupid. Padmé had no wish to die and wanted very much to keep living, but she'd wanted to get a jab in at him. It had been extremely dangerous and stupid, but she'd wanted to test him, to see just how far he would go, and make him angry. Palpatine had said Vader was his slave, and even though it was suicidal, she wanted to see if it was true. She'd wanted him to go against his master's orders. She'd wanted to see that he was real. But he hadn't done it.

At first she'd been disgusted. Disgusted because he'd bowed to his master, that wretched creature, so easily. There had been no hesitation in Vader's voice when he proclaimed he would not kill her. But was there more to it than simply obeying an order? It hadn't appeared so until near the end of their screaming match. When he had told her that he would not take another woman after her.

That quiet admission had cut Padmé to the heart. What was she supposed to think of that? Without her leave she'd been touched by it. Had he meant it the way it sounded, or was there more to it? Had he decided that risking some sort of physical relationship just wasn't worth it? Had it meant that pursuing anything remotely resembling romance was beneath him? Or...

Or had he really meant it the way it had sounded? The way Padmé had understood it originally? Had he meant that he was not and could not have another woman after her? That he didn't want another woman?

Without realizing it, she began to shake as she explored this possibility. What had he meant? If he didn't want someone after her did that mean he only wanted her? That if he no longer had her he would deny himself the physical pleasures of any kind because he... because he what? Because he wanted to remember his times with her? Wanted only her? But why would he only want her? Did he...

Padmé's eyes snapped open as the idea sprung into her head. No. It couldn't be. Not that. There was no possible way that was true! But now that the idea was there, it was blossoming into a nagging puzzle that needed to be solved. Like her original idea to begin this affair with Vader in the first place, this idea would not leave her, and she knew it would haunt her until she did something about it. Even if it was just as dangerous or more so than her original plot.

Did Vader love her?

It sounded so absurd. Of course Vader didn't love her! He was still a Sith Lord, a monster! He'd tried to kill her last night! But he hadn't. She'd felt him lose himself in the moment, into the rage, but he hadn't even touched her. Unlike every other time she'd seen or heard of him, Vader had stopped himself, had stop himself because of her. Because... because why?

Sith Lords did not know about love. They only knew hate. They did not feel anything except contempt and rage. A Sith Lord could only destroy. But he hadn't. He hadn't destroyed her before when it had she caused him discomfort, he hadn't destroyed her last night when she'd obviously hurt him over something. There was no doubt in her mind that he had killed

people for less than the insult she'd paid him. But he hadn't killed her, not even when he had been so close and would have possibly been justified. He hadn't. Not because of his master's wishes, not because he wanted to defy her, but because he hadn't wanted to.

It was startling. It shocked Padmé to her core when she realized it. He hadn't wanted to. That's not what the Emperor had told her. He'd said Vader was looking forward to it, would take great pleasure in it, but he wouldn't. Somehow Padmé just knew that he wouldn't. Her eyes were suddenly opened with this new understanding. Darth Vader hadn't killed her because he hadn't wanted to. He wouldn't have taken pleasure in it because he wanted to keep her. He would take no other women after her because... because he loved her.

It was a fairly reasonable explanation save for the detail that this was Lord Vader she was thinking about. The creature that killed before he listened. Death followed in this man's wake, and whatever he touched died. Except her. Because he cared about her. He might even love her.

The thought utterly terrified Padmé as she didn't know what to think of it. If this was all true, and the infamous Dark Lord loved her—which could still not be true— what did that mean for her? Would he try to keep her forever, even if she was allowed to go? Lock her away and deny her freedom? Just thinking about it frightened her.

But how did she feel about the idea of Vader loving her? Her instinctive response was to feel disgust and push it away. She was a rebel for Force sake! How did it look for her, then, to be actually dating Lord Vader? She could not accept his love.

Could she?

Again, Padmé tried to push aside everything and focus on what her innermost feelings were telling her. Behind the fear and disgust, she was... relieved? Yes, even though she wasn't exactly sure why, she'd been relieved by his words last night that he didn't want another woman after her. The thought of him with someone else upset her more than she would have thought. And with that relief came pleasure. As strange as it was, she was flattered that he, Darth Vader, Second of the Empire, Heir to the Throne, loved her. Not because of his title and rank, but because it meant that of all the women he could have ever had, he chose her. He put himself at odds with his reputation and nature for her.

Closing her eyes, she remembered how it had been before he left. That night he had been with her. If she focused, she could still feel his kiss upon her lips, his hot breath on her neck. The calloused hand roaming over her exposed skin. There had been a feeling that night, a warm, safe feeling even in their fevered intercourse.

Love, she realized. There had been love. In a strange turn of events, Vader had ended up giving himself to her just as she had to him. He had stopped taking long ago, she realized, he'd been trying to give back. It had only been with their last encounter with each other that he had finally figured out exactly how to express it. She had guided him, he had needed her to guide him. It was like he'd been waiting all his life for someone direct him this way, and when she had, it had finally opened him up, finally allowed him to express what was always hidden away and bottled up inside that black suit.

I love him, she thought in astonishment. It didn't make sense, it went against reason and sanity, but she knew now what it was she'd felt for him, after so long. She loved him. Not just

because of the way he made her body feel. Somehow, after living with him for so long, she'd become attuned to him, to his feelings and emotions. It was as though she had been able to see something deep within him that perhaps he didn't even see. There was good in him, it wasn't just wishful thinking. There really was something in there, he just didn't know how to express it...

No, this couldn't be! She loved him?! Why?! He was a horrible creature that killed without remorse. How could she love him? She hardly knew him! This had to be something else. For both of them. This was all some sort of strange fantasy. She'd been kept in here too long with no one but him. It was like one of those crazy romance novels her sister liked to indulge in. Love wasn't about just sleeping with someone and imagining they had feelings and hidden emotions that only you could bring out.

But there was also more going on here than what met the eye. Padmé knew that. She was feeling something, and Vader obviously was as well. It might look like love, but she wasn't going to give into the temptation of allowing herself to indulge in a fantasy. This could all be just speculation, a trick that her mind was playing on her. It had been a rather poor choice on her part to start this whole fling with Vader in the first place, she wasn't going to be so quick this time just because an idea struck. She would wait and see how all this panned out.

Getting up out of bed, deciding that there was no point in trying to sleep anymore, Padmé stared out the window. It was still fairly dark out, or as dark as Coruscant ever got. Of course there was still so much traffic out, no matter the time. Looking back over at her nightstand, she saw the stone she had taken from Vader's chambers. It was the only 'personal' thing that she had found, and it more than likely wasn't even his.

Briefly she wondered what it really was. It was obviously some sort of decorative piece, perhaps jewelry for some poor native on a more primitive planet. It was beautiful in an exotic sense. Naboo was such a built up, developed planet, anything like this was excitingly different. She wondered what planet it had come from. She wondered if Vader had killed the owner. Even though it wouldn't have surprised her, she hoped that wasn't the case. That part of her that believed there was good in him paled at the thought that he could do such a thing, even as she knew it was true.

Picking it up, she turned it over in her hand, again looking at the single, easily missed word on the back. Shmi. She wondered what it meant. Was this for good luck? Fortune? Or something different? Maybe it had come off of something bigger, like a headdress or necklace? Maybe she could look it up later?

For a few hours Padmé sat watching the traffic, thinking as she turned her hands over the smooth stone. When the door chimed, he feared that it was Vader. She wasn't sure she could face him, especially since the annoying question of love kept bouncing around in her head and wouldn't leave her alone. But when no one barged in, she assumed it wasn't him. Vader was not so patient when it came to waiting for doors.

Walking over, still in her nightgown, the senator opened it to find 3PO standing just outside. "Good morning, my lady!" he said in delight. The droid had obviously not learned what had transpired the night before, and did not know of the fight that had occurred between her and his master. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"Not at all," she gave a weak smile.

"I thought I would inform you that there will be a crew to replace the windows and clean up everything here later this morning so you'll be able to move back very soon."

"Okay. Thank you."

"Would you like for me to bring your necessary showering provisions and a change of clothes here for you?" he asked.

Padmé smiled at the helpful droid. "I'll go get them myself." She paused. "Although I could probably use some help getting it all here. Would you mind?"

"Oh, not at all, my lady!" 3PO cried, delighted to help.

And so, as they made their way back to the battlefield from the previous evening, Padmé remembered something important. "Threepio? You speak many different languages and understand different cultures, right?"

"Oh, yes, my lady!" 3PO bobbed his head. "I am fluent in over six million forms of communications and can—"

"What does 'shmi' mean?" she asked, glad they had made it safely inside her room so that she could avoid certain individuals.

The droid was thoughtful for a moment. "Well, in most languages it is simply a verb or preposition. In Bothese it means 'to recover' and in Mon Calamarian it means 'land.' On Rishi it means 'the chosen.' There are other definitions of it simply being an adjective that—"

"I think I get it," she mumbled, frowning in thought. Realizing she was going to have to risk it, she held up the stone for the droid to see. "Do you know what culture this could have come from? And does it have any connection to the word shmi?"

3PO went incredibly still, and stood as if frozen for several long moments, seeming to just stare at the object in her hand. "Where did you get that, my lady?" he asked, sounding more frightened and panicked than she had ever heard him before. Which was saying a lot.

"I... found it," she lied, shrugging her shoulder. "Why?"

"That's Lord Vader's!" he cried. "Oh, he will be looking for it! He told me to put it away while he was gone, but I'd forgotten! But he will look for it soon, very soon I'm sure! You must give it back to me, please! I must return it!"

Such a volatile reaction was not what she had been expecting. It was important, whatever it was, something that Vader would look for. Had he taken it from wherever he'd gotten it because it held some sort of power? Some sort of information? If Vader was so interested in such an object, certainly the rebellion probably would be too.

Clutching it to her chest, she shook her head. "Not until you tell me what it is and why it's so important."

"Oh dear, oh dear!" the droid wailed. "Please, my lady! That is extremely important to my master. If anything should happen to it..." He didn't bother to finish himself, signifying to Padmé that this must really be top secret information. Maybe she'd hit the jackpot at last.

"Tell me or I'll never give it back," she threatened.

"If you don't, he'll come here and take it from you!" the droid cried. "I'm not entirely certain what he would do if he found you had it. Please, just give it to me and I'll return it directly!"

"No," she shook her head. She felt a little cruel being like this to the panicky droid. "Just tell me and I'll give it to you and Vader will never have to know it was gone and you didn't put it away like you were supposed to."

The droid hesitated, looking as uncomfortable and worried as a droid possibly could, before he finally seemed to be giving. "It's very important to him..."

"Tell me what it is and what 'shmi' means and I'll give it back," she promised. "Why is this so important to him?"

"It belonged to his mother!" 3PO blurted out.

Padmé was once more shocked to her core. Mother? Darth Vader had a mother? Of course some part of her had always known that this had to be, but to hear of such a thing spoken out loud and confirmed? It didn't seem real.

"Mother?" she repeated, still stunned.

"Shmi was the name of his mother," the droid moaned, the dam bursting now that he'd gotten started. "It had apparently come from a necklace she'd made and is the only thing he has left of his planet before he was taken!"

More questions were raised than answered, but none could firmly form in Padmé's mind as she was still dazed at what she'd heard. Vader had a mother. This had once been a necklace piece from the mother of Vader. It blew her mind. Suddenly Vader became more real to her than ever before. He was suddenly more human. A mother. There was a beginning to Lord Vader and it wasn't at the birth of the Empire. There really was a past for him, something for him to look back to that was not Imperial.

Once she'd managed to digest some of the information, her mind was able to function enough that she could finally ask a question. "Taken for what?"

"For his Sith training." If he could have, 3PO would have sighed.

"But... was he taken or did he go?" There was a huge difference between the words. 3PO had deliberately chosen the word 'taken' and she wanted to know exactly what he'd meant by it.

"He was taken after his mother's death," the droid explain, looking highly uncomfortable somehow. "He was then given into the guardianship of Emperor Palpatine."

"Guardianship?" This was becoming more confusing than less by the minute. "How old was he when he was taken?"

"My lady, please! I've already said too much!" the droid begged.

Knowing that he was right, and not wanting Vader to take his wrath out on the poor machine, she handed the stone, the necklace, back to 3PO. She still couldn't believe it. That had belonged to the woman who had given birth to Darth Vader. Darth Vader had a mother.

“How do you know all this?” she asked. Somehow she couldn’t imagine the Sith just sitting down and telling his life story to a droid.

“He told me, of course,” 3PO held the piece as carefully as a machine could, almost sounding self-righteous. “I was his closest confidant when he was younger. It was one of the many reasons he built me.”

It was too much. Padmé’s eyes finally bugged out. “He built you?” she cried.

“Of course,” the droid replied, calmer now that he had gotten back something so personally valuable to his master back. “He knew he needed someone to care for him.”

Unable to stop herself, Padmé sat down heavily on the bed. So. This was a day full of surprises. Vader had a mother, Vader had become a Sith at a young enough age that he needed a guardian, and Vader had built C-3PO. Would wonders ever cease? Unable to stop herself, she started laughing. All this day needed was for Vader to come to her and declare his undying love for her and she would have realized she’d finally gone insane.

Just when she thought there could be nothing left to surprise her about the Sith Lord, that she had finally figured him out, something always came back to slapped her in the face. Just when she thought she knew what to think, it all shifted again.

It suddenly struck Padmé that she’d gone into his chambers in search of proof that he was not a machine and she’d believed she hadn’t found anything. Little did she know that it was a machine and a stone that showed his humanity. Hidden in plain sight, Vader had kept precious, personal things in which he held dear. The only thing he had of his planet and of a mother that was no longer here, and a droid he’d built for companionship. It all sounded so sad, so...

Stop thinking about him like that! she scolded herself immediately. You still don’t even know him beyond what you see and what Threepio says. Whoever Vader was before becoming a Sith is probably long gone.

Sighing to herself, Padmé decided to just grab her things and leave to get ready for the day. No use waiting around here for the repair crew to come and see her in her nightgown. So as she went into the ‘fresher and collected all she needed, she could hear 3PO moving again.

“Oh! Oh dear! I nearly forgot! My lady, I was also to inform you that you would be escorted to a party tonight by Lord Vader.”

Padmé nearly dropped what she’d been holding. “What?! There’s no party tonight.”

“This is, as I understand it, one for Imperial officers and the like. Lord Vader is required to make an appearance, and so too are you,” the droid explained.

So much for spending a Saturday alone thinking about all she’d discovered. But she was convinced she’d been through worse.

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Padmé stood rigidly beside Vader later that evening when they were at the party. They hadn’t spoken a word to one another all day, not even on the flight over. They had taken one of Vader’s luxury speeders, a model she was sure wasn’t even out on the market yet, and now



here they were, standing and watching as the cream of the cream in the Imperial Navy and Army mingled. She had really fallen in the nexu den now.

3PO had helped her pick out a dress for the evening, a long, black affair that was tight around the middle with a silver belt that flowed down to pool at her feet. The large, heavy silver necklace she wore served also as straps for the dress and made sure that nothing would fall down by accident, though she wore a long black velvet cloak to keep her warm in the chilling air and protect her just in case. Somehow, even with 3PO's help, she's managed to twister her hair back into buns on either side of her head and put a matching headpiece on to complete the image of sophistication. It was all simple, but that's what made it elegant.

She needn't have worried about how plain she was, the rest of the woman were either as simply dressed as she was or looked like plain trash. It was actually quite shocking how some of the Grand Moff's wives were not only dressing, but were behaving. She would have thought they would know better than and would act with decorum. Apparently not.

Next to her she knew Vader held the same contempt for them... and everyone else, really. It was clear that he didn't want to be here, but his presence was required. He was the Supreme Commander, after all, it wouldn't look so good if he didn't bother to come. But Vader apparently took 'being there' in the most literal sense only as he still did not mingle, but stood at the side, watching. Padmé stayed by his side and said nothing. She didn't really know anyone here.

Well, that was no entirely true. A busty redhead caught her sight, hanging off the arm of yet another General. She wondered what happened to the last. Maybe he was out on assignment and Cotrilla had gotten bored? Sounded like a real possibility.

Looking over the room, Padmé's eye caught the refreshment table. Even though she was still nervous by being next to Vader again after the other night, she was hungry. Maybe a little something to nibble on. Glancing up at the Sith, she looked back over at the food table and started to leave.

A hand fell on her shoulder. "Where are you going?"

The first four words of the entire day! She tried not to shiver at his touch. "To get refreshments. I'm hungry."

"No wine," he commanded sternly, though he need not have said anything. Padmé had learned her lesson perfectly well last time.

So she was allowed to go off on her own. Not that she was going to take advantage of anything. She didn't know anyone here and just wanted something to eat. With nothing else to do, she would go back over to stand beside the Sith Lord and eat in silence and hope that they would leave early.

"Senator Amidala."

Padmé turned in time to see Ritia sashaying over to her, a wicked smile on her face. The younger woman nearly groaned out loud. "Good evening, Senator Cotrilla. How are you?" she asked as she continued to make herself a plate.

"Wonderful, as always," the other woman smirked, grabbing a glass of wine. It was clear she'd already had some. "And you? Still pretending to be Lord Vader's girlfriend?"

While she should not dignify that with a response, it still hit a little too close to home. Padmé's emotions were still jumbled around everywhere and she wasn't sure if she was something to Vader and didn't want to be, or if she wasn't and wanted to be. All her mind could produce for her was the image of a lonely young man with no mother sitting with 3PO wanting companionship as Palpatine loomed over him. Did she really want to entangle herself more fully with such a complicated and, frankly, messed up man?

"I don't have to pretend anything," Padmé smiled tightly, knowing it wasn't entirely true. "I was invited to come with him and here I am."

The redhead jutted out her hip and crossed her arms disbelievingly, sloshing her wine a bit. "Right. So tell me, if you are really dating him, and are his girlfriend, what's he like? What's under that mask? And what's under his belt," she smirked.

A blush sprang to Padmé's cheeks before she could stop it. Images of what she had felt when she and Vader were in private came to mind. The hard muscles, the actual normal feeling hair, the soft lips, and of course the way he could make her feel from the inside out. She could tell Ritia what Vader was like in clear detail, but she would not, not even if she was at liberty to do so.

"He's really not so different outside the public view as he is within," she answered honestly. "He's busy most of the time, and so am I."

"I knew it," the other woman snorted. "This is just some sort of hoax. Why is Lord Vader even playing along with this? You're just using him."

Oh if only that were true, Padmé thought wistfully. Things would be much simpler then.

"I am not using him," she stated firmly, straighten up to her full height. "We were brought together on a certain issue, have gotten to know each other better for it, and now come to functions together for convenience sake. That is all. Now if you'll excuse me," she nodded towards the other senator, even as it killed her to do so, before she left, grabbing some water as she went.

When she returned to Vader's side, she saw Moff Fairfax with him. She shuttered, not wanting to go over to the other man who had been so vulgar last time she'd met him, but knew, somehow, that Vader would protect her this time. It was... comforting.

Walking over to the two men, she bowed her head in greeting. "Moff Fairfax."

The other man had looked extremely nervous before, but now he looked almost as though he'd be sick. Whatever they had been talking about before must not have been good. Maybe Vader had brought up what had happened last time. Maybe he had been voicing his displeasures at how the Moff had treated her? That was a nice thought.

"Senator Amidala," the Moff bowed his head low. Very low. "It is a pleasure to see you again this evening."

Knowing that the Sith was near her, and that this man was fighting to keep his life with Vader listening so closely now, Padmé put on her best, more charming smile. It was wrong of her and she didn't really want the other man to die at the hands of Vader... but oh how she wanted to make him suffer for the things he'd said to her the last time they'd met!

“Pleasure,” she drawled, showing how little she thought of him while still maintaining protocol. ‘I’m afraid I won’t be able to dance tonight,’ she smiled tightly, causing the man to flinch. “I don’t feel much like it.”

Vader shifted closer to her, and for just one wild moment, she thought he was going to put his arm around her, but he didn’t. Of course he didn’t. That would be absurd. He wouldn’t do that, and had just moved closer to be territorial...right? She was lying to herself, of course, as she could feel anger and protectiveness radiating off of him.

“O-Of course not, I wouldn’t dare try to take you away from your date. I mean, escort. I... I mean—”

“Shut up,” Vader snapped, and even though it was horribly bad manners, Padmé struggled not to smile.

“Yes, my lord!” the Moff bowed before all but running away. When he was gone, Padmé did smile.

“He won’t bother you again,” Vader rumbled quietly, for her ears only.

Her heart beat wildly in her chest, somehow just knowing that he had done that for her. For just a moment, she let her defensiveness drop and leaned into the knowledge that he was being kind to her, in his own messed up, Sith way. “I know,” she nearly whispered, afraid to look up lest she smile at him again. “Thank you.”

And once more they fell into silence, a more comfortable one this time. After all she’d said to him, how cruel she’d been, he was still there, still watching over her, and not because of the Emperor. Not completely. Maybe there was something to care about within this man. Maybe he really did just need a guide?

## 23. Maternal

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When Sola Naberrie wanted to know something, she usually found out. She was not the politician in the family or the earth-shaker that her father and sister were. But if anyone or anything came between Sola and what she wanted, there was hell to pay.

Storming through the Naboo palace, charging forward with single-minded intent, the stay-at-home mother was fully committed to dispatch anything or anyone in her way. She was not here as a citizen, friend, or mother. She was here as a big sister. A big sister that would stop at nothing until she knew what had happened to her baby sister, Padmé. Let security try and stop her. She dared them.

Fortunately, most of the palace guards recognized her and she was free to go as she pleased. Since she was not making a beeline for the throne room or anywhere close to the queen, they let her be. For the time being. Briefly she wondered what they would do once they realized she was about to kill a certain senator that had returned to her planet without her sister.

Coming to her destination, Sola banged on the ancient door, hoping it sounded as furious as she was. Even though she knew that she shouldn't, she wanted Bail to feel as miserable as possible. How was it that the man came here without Padmé? This wasn't even his planet, for Force sake! He had better have a good excuse or at the very least some pretty damn good information about what had happened to her sister or so help her, Sola would kill him.

When no one opened the door right away, Sola began banging louder, even though her hand hurt in the process. "Bail Organa, you open this door right now or I will blast it down!" she yelled.

A second later, a very frazzled senator opened the door, and stared down at the irate woman. "Sola!" he breathed. "Force, what is the matter with you? Are you trying to get yourself arrested?"

"Save it," she snapped. "Where's Padmé?"

That infernal stately mask fell into place so quickly, Sola immediately knew something was wrong. "Senator Amidala is on Coruscant, of course. She—"

The Naboo woman held up her hand for silence, trying to control herself so she wouldn't start screaming again. Or crying. The stress the last several months, and indeed almost two weeks ago when Padmé had managed to call their parents, had really taken its toll on her and her family. To know that Padmé was being held by the Emperor and Lord Vader... it wasn't a comforting thought.

"Where is Padmé?" she asked again, this time more slowly, more deliberately.

"Sola," the Alderaanian began tiredly.

"Where is she?" Sola snapped. "I'm not leaving here until I know exactly what happened to my baby sister!"

“In you must let her, Senator,” a strange voice from within said. “Better it is for her to know.”

The Alderaanian looked back before sighing. The woman watched as he stepped aside and gestured for her to enter. She hadn’t realized he had guests, and she felt a little embarrassed that she’d been all but throwing a tantrum out in the hallway. Not her best hour, but it had yielded results. In the end, that’s all that really mattered.

As she stepped in, Sola saw a small green being standing near the large bed, and in the large bed laid... “Hey!” she exclaimed as the door closed. “I remember you. You’re the Jedi that protected my sister about ten years ago when the planet was under attack from the Trade Federation.”

He looked terrible, and considerably different than the last time Sola had seen him. Indeed, he was older, his hair grown out slightly, and he had a beard. His face was pale and wrought with stress while his arm was thickly rapped up, as was one leg. After the purges, she hadn’t thought there were any Jedi left. It came as a tremendous surprise to her to see one sitting there, perhaps not well, but at least in one piece.

“Hello, my lady,” the Jedi tried to smile at her. “How are you?”

Sola continued to stare for a long moment before turning towards the small green creature. If that man was a Jedi, then what was this being? Bail was looking uncomfortable and certainly unsure, which was not a common expression on the Alderaanian’s face. It startled the Naboo woman.

“Trust her we can, I sense,” the green being said, stepping forward. “Jedi Master Yoda, I am. Your sister, I have known well. Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi, you already know.”

It took a moment for everything to sink in, but when it did, Sola’s eyes grew wide and she realized just what she had walked into. “By the Force,” she breathed. “Bail, you’re harboring fugitives of the galaxy!” she hissed, her eyes darting from one Jedi to the other, glancing about the room as though the Empire were to charge in at any second.

The senator smirked at her, but it was a sad, self-deprecating sort of expression. “Oh, it goes farther than that, I’m afraid, Mrs. Naberrie. Have you ever heard of an organization called the Rebel Alliance?”

The color from the young mother’s face drained instantly. She might not be the politician of the family or the queen of a planet, but she was smart. Very smart, and it didn’t take her long to recognize all that was happening, what must have happened. Walking forward, she slumped down on the bed, sitting down hard, but making sure she did not hit the invalid beside her. “Padmé’s a rebel too, isn’t she?” she asked, looking at each man in turn.

The senator and Kenobi looked astounded. “How did you know?” Bail asked.

Sola snorted. “Please. You think I don’t know my own sister? I’ve always wondered how she could sit on the Galactic Senate when she believed so strongly in everything that opposes it. And now she has suddenly been forced out of contact with everyone and under the particular care of the Emperor and Darth Vader?” She rolled her eyes. “Please. I might not like my sister, but I’m not stupid.” Her engineering degree said so.

“No one ever thought you were,” Obi-Wan sat up, leaning forward to try and offer a comforting hand to the woman.

Master Yoda was staring at her thoughtfully. “Your silence on the matter will be assured?”

It really was a toss-up between if she was more disbelieving or angry with them at the moment. “You really think I would risk my little sister’s life by going around and blabbing?” She sent them all a vicious glare. “You really have to ask?”

“We have to be careful,” Bail amended. “We’ve been getting by on borrowed time as it is.”

“What do you mean?”

Again, the men all shared a look and it only served to make Sola even angrier. Even though she knew it was not what they were trying to do, it made her feel like a child, a simpler being that they believed wouldn’t understand the complexities of the situation. It was patronizing and felt like the time when she was younger and her parents wouldn’t tell her what was really happening with a cousin of theirs that had gotten into some major trouble when he’d been studying abroad. They had thought they were protecting her and that she wouldn’t understand the situation from a more mature level. Perhaps they were right to an extent, but it was still frustrating. Young people weren’t stupid, and neither was she just because she was out of the loop on this one.

“Lord Vader is on to us, I believe,” the Alderaanian said at last. “He’s been monitoring your sister extensively, hardly letting her out of his sight. He was even the one that injured Obi-Wan.”

Shocked, Sola turned her head towards the blonde who was looking uneasy just as much as he was grim. “You survived Lord Vader?” she asked in awe. “Then... then you must truly be a great warrior! You could defeat him!”

But before she had even finished, Kenobi was shaking his head in the negative. “I’m afraid not. I barely left the fight at all, and I was only able to do that because Vader let me go.” For a moment, the blue eyes took on a far away, thoughtful expression, before he brought himself back out of his reserve again. ‘Besides,’ his smile was one that bespoke great pain and sadness. “—I never even managed to get a hit on him at all.”

In her humble option, anyone that could walk away from a fight with Lord Vader had to be a great warrior whether they were let go or not. The Sith was terrifying, and his reputation didn’t help afford him to anyone. It always amazed Sola that no one had ever had a heart attack after just looking at the creature with their own eyes. What frightened her more, however, was the fact that it was this creature her little sister now found herself captive to. If the Jedi could not stand up to this hell-spawn, what hope did her sister?

As the thought sank in, Sola started to shake, her anxiety over everything getting the better of her at last. It was a family trait to be strong in the face of adversity, but even a Nabberie had their limit. Sola had finally hit hers, and now that the situation with her little sister was starting to flesh out and she was beginning to image all the horrible things that could befall her sister. Before it had been speculation, just her imagination and unconfirmed truths. Now...

"Is... is she okay?" she whispered, staring at Bail, knowing he would know better than the others. "She's not... he hasn't..."

The senator became extremely somber, his features grim. After a deep breath, he came and sat down near her, causing a thrill of panic to shoot through her. "She was well last I saw her," he began carefully. "There has never been any real physical injuries that any of us could see. But..."

"But he's probably been mentally torturing her," Sola finished bluntly. There was no use sugar coding the truth.

"I'm not sure if that is the case, at least not in the way you're thinking," Bail added quickly, trying to put her fears to rest. It wasn't working.

"Tell me the truth, Bail," she snapped, becoming impatient. She could handle this. "What have you seen?"

Hesitation was not a good quality for a senator, but Sola understood why he did. It was always hard for someone to deliver bad news to a family. "Most days she seems fine," he began slowly. 'For the first several weeks she seemed... withdrawn, not really herself. Later she was better. Her freedom has been greatly inhibited, but she has managed to work around it. Somehow,' he smiled fondly, as if thinking back to his friend. "Although... I haven't told any of you this," he looked apologetically at the two Jedi, "but Padmé is the one has been giving me information."

Obi-Wan looked uncomfortable, while Yoda dour. Sola couldn't help the dread that settled over her. "She's been smuggling information to you while under Vader's care?" she asked disbelievingly. "How?"

"I'm not entirely sure," the senator admitted with a sigh. "But I trust her," he stated firmly.

"Then why was an assassin sent after her?" Sola demanded, suddenly remembering the news she'd heard. "Because you had such utter faith in her?" she sneered.

"That was not an ordered attack," Bail denied. "Or at least I didn't know about it. I'd never seen the man before in my life, and from what I could gather, neither had Padmé."

"You've been sending me to planet after planet using her information... Bail," Obi-Wan groaned. "What if this was all a trap? What if Vader was just letting her give this information? What if that's how he knew I was on Geonosis?"

At last the Alderaanian seemed to have grown a backbone and stood up a little straighter. "I might not have the Force to tell me when someone's lying or anything like that, but I know Padmé was telling the truth. I think... I think Vader must have questioned her at one point before she passed on any information anyway."

Even though this was a whole new playing field for the stay-at-home mother, Sola knew that by 'questioning' he had really meant 'torture,' or at least that was not out of the possibility. It made her feel cold inside to know that while she was safe on Naboo with her family, her sister was being held prisoner and tortured while she fought for what she believed in. Why had Padmé gotten herself mixed into all this mess? Why had she ever agreed to become senator in the first place? Surely she'd paid back all her dues to the planet as queen! They'd stolen her childhood for that and now they wanted her freedom?

“She recovered quickly,” Bail went on, as if remembering how Sola might interpret his words. “She was very careful, too, about how she passed information. She and Vader struck some sort of deal, she’d said. That she could spend at least an hour a day without him monitoring her. Probably to help her maintain her sanity so she’d be useful.”

“Or further torture,” Obi-Wan stated sadly. “Make her realized what she could have, but denying her the full taste of it.”

“Regardless, she seems to have adjusted well to it,” the senator sent a glare at his friend, who seemed too much lost in thought to notice the insensitivity of his words. While Sola, on one level, was annoyed with the Jedi, she at least appreciated his honesty. “There have only been a few times where she has not seemed well.”

“Which translates to, my sister is absolutely miserable, because if you were able to see her worn out and generally not doing well, that means she wasn’t able to hide it, which means that she’s in far worse shape than you know.” Putting her head in her hands, Sola leaned forward, trying not to image the torture her sister went through on a daily basis. “We have to help her.”

“And help her, we will.” Yoda jumped up next to the woman and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Powerful things are happening in the Force. Very powerful. Senator Amidala, in the middle of it, she is. Obi-Wan, visions of hope he has had. The Emperor and Vader, maintain their power forever they cannot.”

“But if Padmé’s in the middle of this, what if she gets hurt? What if she gets caught in the crossfire?” Sola stood up. She needed to move. Moving always helped her think. “If thing are happening and the Emperor and Vader are going to fall, what if they realize it and kill my sister in an attempt to save themselves by using her as leverage?”

“I don’t think that will happen.”

The Jedi and Sola looked at Bail, surprised. “Why not?” the Naboo woman asked.

Once more, the senator seemed uncomfortable, but he pushed on. “I’ve seen your sister and Vader together and... and it’s not what you think.”

Sola scoffed. “Are you trying to sell me that whole relationship garbage the media is?”

“No, but I am trying to sell you the idea that there is something going on between them... I can’t really explain it,” he sighed. “Vader is extremely attentive to Padmé, to the point where he almost looks like an over anxious mother watching over her child.”

Darth Vader, Lord of the Sith, a mother figure? Had it been a different Imperial authority other than Vader, and another girl in Padmé’s shoes, Sola might have burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of it all. What Bail had just described was so ludicrously far-fetched, that it bored on absurdity. Sola was going to tell him that too, but caught Kenobi sitting up straighter, looking as though he had a realization come over him before he smothered it back down and once again melted into a pensive silence out of the corner of her eye. She wondered if anyone else saw it.

Instead of yelling and scolding the other man for being such an idiot, however, all Sola could muster up to say was, “You’re crazy.”



Obviously the Alderaanian knew that such a response would be likely, and fought to remain as poised and stately as possible. It was the sort of look that told Sola she'd gotten under his skin but didn't want to admit it. It amused her, at least. "I know what it sounds like," he acknowledged, "but it's true. One night at a party they were both attending, Padmé...had... more than she probably should have—" big sister instincts kicked in and Sola scowled at the idea, "—and Vader came over to collect her from me. Himself. I know it doesn't sound like much, but if you know Lord Vader even a little, you know he wouldn't bother with the trouble of being near anyone intoxicated.

"He... he was... patient with Padmé," he went on, his face scrunching up in confusion of his own, even as he tried to make the others understand. 'Lord Vader isn't patient with anyone. He was angry with her, to be sure!' he amended quickly. "But I got the feeling that he was angry because she was drunk and not because he didn't like her... It was similar to how a parent would be disappointed and furious at their child for making the same stupid mistake."

Once more, Sola couldn't help but snort at the idea. "So what? You think Padmé's all right because Lord Vader's going to adopt her?"

"No, of course not like that," Bail blushed. "But what I am trying to say is that your sister has some sort of... power of him. She must have something over him, because I've never seen or heard of Lord Vader acting so... tolerant with anyone before."

"Hmm... strange his behavior is," Yoda nodded. "Add to Obi-Wan's release, stranger still. The Force is at work."

They all fell silent again, each lost in thought for different reasons. While she'd come here to get information about her sister, and was expecting anything and everything, this development had stunned her. Padmé had always had a way of swaying people to her point of view, a power over them, to talk them into just about anything. Could it really be true that she had managed to do this with Lord Vader?

It didn't seem likely. Padmé had always been an optimistic. Sola was a realist. And looking at the facts, something wasn't lining up. Lord Vader didn't bend, he didn't make deals, and he hated senators. So how was it that Padmé had miraculously struck a bargain with the Sith? This had to be some sort of trick. But then, why would Vader suddenly show such patience with his sister? Unless it was all for appearance sake? Although that didn't seem likely either as she'd never heard of Lord Vader actually caring about what other people thought of him. So why start now?

No, there was something missing here. Even these men were hiding something from her, she just knew it. Or at least Kenobi was. The way he closed off after the beginning of their conversation told Sola that this man knew much more than he was letting on. Maybe it was nothing, maybe she was just being suspicious, but there was something not quite right about this entire situation.

"And what about Padmé?" she asked again, tired. "What are we going to do about her? Parental or not, we have to get her away from him."

"If there were an opportunity, we would try, but with Vader always near her..." Bail trailed off with a sigh.

"Away from her, we must get him," Yoda nodded. "Or get them away from Coruscant."

“That’s it!” Sola cried, rushing over to the little green being, and nearly kissing him. ‘The anniversary of defeating the Trade Federation is coming up. Padmé has always come home for that and participated in the festivities. This year is the eleventh anniversary.’ At their rather blank expressions, she had to roll her eyes. “Elven is a cultural significant number here. This is a big deal! If she doesn’t attend, it could create a huge scandal.”

The senator was smiling now, having caught on. “If we pushed to have her here, the Emperor would have to oblige! The Empire is still shaky, at best, and he can’t have discontent on his homeworld! It would be too much of an outrage.”

“He would have to have Padmé come here, and even if that means Vader tags along, they will at least be out of Coruscant, and not have as many resources,” Sola was grinning with excitement.

Kenobi remained pensive, while Yoda was nodding along. “Yes. A distraction would be needed to secure your sister,” the Jedi Master was nodding. “Deal, I will, with Vader.”

That snapped the blonde from his thoughts at last. “No, Master!” he cried. “You cannot face Vader. He’s too powerful. Your knowledge of the Jedi way must be preserved.”

“Fight him again, you cannot, Obi-Wan,” the old master looked over his student sadly. “A distraction is needed.”

“Yes, but there has to be another way than direct conflict,” Obi-Wan shook his head sadly. ‘You would fare better than I did,’ he gazed down at his arm ruefully, “but I still do not believe you would be able to win against him. His abilities are not what you would expect.”

“No one has to cut up anyone else with laser swords,” Sola snapped, feeling like she was listening to some sort of childish debate between her daughters. Couldn’t they see that there were more important things to finalize first other than how to distract Vader? That would come later. “Right now we need to push the queen into requesting for Padmé to be brought back here. Then we’ll figure out exactly how to deal with Vader and what will be done with Padmé once she’s free.”

“I could always take her to the Rebel Base,” Bail offered. “That would be safest.”

Sola nodded. “All right then. Do you two agree? I have a feeling we will need Jedi intervention.”

Even though the younger Jedi looked doubtful, the master was nodding. And so together, even though she knew what she was doing was treasonous, and crazy, Sola unofficially joined the Rebel Alliance in the hopes that she could mend her broken family and get her baby sister back.

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Sitting at the lunch table with Cory, Padmé pushed her food around distractedly. She didn’t feel much like eating. There was still far too much on her mind.

“Are you going to eat that, or am I going to have to shove it down your throat?”

Startled, she looked up to find Cory glaring at her. Ever since her meeting with the Emperor, he’d taken his guard duty to a whole new level. An annoying level. Now he really

was like a babysitter, always telling her to eat something or he'd make her. Granted, his concern was touching, and even necessary the week before, but now that Vader had come back, and she was starting to figure things out, it wasn't entirely necessary. She even played with the idea of not eating simply to vex the trooper.

But when he started to stand up, scowling, Padmé immediately shoved her food in her mouth and began to chew dutifully. The Storm Trooper sat down again, a satisfied expression on his face as he continued to eat his own lunch. He even muttered a "that's more like it" in between the bites.

The senator had to hide her smile. Who knew troopers could be so motherly?

"So what was with you last week anyway?" he asked after a few moments of silence. The appropriate amount of time must have passed if he brought this up. "You seem a lot better now."

"I am better now," Padmé held back a sigh. Motherly or not, Storm Troopers were still some of the most blunt, tactless people she'd met when it came to conversation.

"Not entirely," he eyed her carefully, like she was some sort of wild beast. He paused before asking earnestly, "What happened?"

CT-585 was a Storm Trooper. A clone. Just another white helmet. A dime a dozen. But when she got down to the personal level, when she saw so much emotion in his eyes, Padmé knew he was his own person, an individual with feelings and personality. He was Cory, and he wasn't like anyone else in the galaxy.

"You really are special, Cory, you know that?" She gave him a warm smile, which only warmed as his face betrayed confused shock. "What happened was... I don't know. I was stupid, partially."

The trooper remained silent, and Padmé knew she was going to have to explain more. He'd been patient with her last week, probably because he'd realized how upset she was, but now that she was getting back to normal. And so was he.

"It was just some things the Emperor told me," she admitted. "It was... hard to listen to."

"But now it's better?" he asked skeptically. "Just like that?"

"No, not just like that," she sighed. "It's just that... well, Lord Vader explained some things to me that I hadn't thought of before." It wasn't entirely a lie. Showing was similar to telling.

A bright, wicked smile suddenly came onto the trooper's face, and a playful gleam entered his eye, one that Padmé knew instantly that she wasn't going to like. At all. "Oh, I see how it is," Cory leaned back, stuffing his face with chips as he did so. "Lord Vader goes away and you're all emotional and distraught, and the only thing that makes it better is when he's back again, is that it?"

Padmé stared at her friend for a moment in utter horror before a spectacular blush appeared on her cheeks. "No!" she cried. "That's most certainly not it at all!"

"Sure it's not," he winked.

"It's not like that," she insisted, wondering why she was even arguing with him in the first place. It only made her look all the guiltier, but it had hit a little too close for comfort.

"Then what's it like?" he asked, leaning forward to show she had his undivided attention.

It took a few moments for Padmé to decide how she should handle this. Cory wasn't like other people. Troopers were bred to hunt out lies and seemed completely immune to the typical political talking around the issue strategy. Troopers were blunt by nature and their thinking reflected it. Once they got an idea into their head they didn't change it easily unless they were ordered to from the higher ups. But only from the higher ups.

Sighing, Padmé realized she was going to have to say something to get him off her back. "The Emperor said something to me that was very... disturbing," she said carefully. Cory nodded, probably remembering how she'd hugged him and bawled. The poor trooper had had to comfort her, which must have been very awkward for him.

"What he said was hurtful, and it gave me a lot to think about," she began. "When Lord Vader returned from... wherever he'd gone, I was still upset, but he sort of... well, made some good points that I had to think over again. But what he'd said and done calmed me down a little."

Cory was frowning. "Then how is what I said wrong?"

"Because you're implying the romantic, and it wasn't like that!" Padmé snapped. Oh how she wished she could wipe that smirk off his face.

"Whatever you say," he shrugged and went back to his meal.

But the more she thought about it, the more Padmé knew Cory was right. As strange as it sounded, Vader had a sort of... calming effect on her. When he was away she felt like her brain was going to explode, she always had so much to think about. When he was with her, she didn't necessarily have the time to sit and dwell on anything for too long. And since beginning their deal, when he was with her, he had this way of making her feel... so... incredible. A part of her wondered if that was truly what love felt like, but she tried to dismiss it. She couldn't hurry into this.

"Cory?" She waited for his grunt before continuing. "What's Lord Vader like?"

The trooper frowned at her. "You've asked me this before, Senator."

"I know," she sighed, "but I just don't know what to think about him. There are times I think I know a little, but then I find out something or see something, and my whole perception of him is skewed even farther out of whack. I honestly don't know what to make of the man," she admitted.

"He's a good man," Cory said instantly, probably falling back on his training without a second thought. "He's a doer and fights to protect the galaxy. He gets a bad rep. but he does what needs to be done, and does it effectively. He's not like other people that let their fake reputations rule how they move."

That was a good point, even if it was bias and based upon ignorant information. "I know," she said softly. "But there are times when I don't even think he's human, or whatever he is. It's like there's nothing really in that suit."

Cory fell silent, looking a bit uneasy with talking about his boss in such a way. But there was also a determination on his face that bespoke of his desire to help her. Padmé was once again truly thankful to have Cory around, and that she'd taken the time to get to know him.

"Well," he said after a moment, "he cares about you. Isn't that enough?"

Padmé went very still. "He cares about me? He told you?"

"Of course not," the trooper waved her off, momentarily crushing a hope she hadn't even realized she'd had. "But I know he does."

"How?"

"Are you joking?" Cory snorted, looking at her incredulously. "If he didn't, he probably would have passed his assignment to watch you over to me solely after a while. He doesn't have to drive you every day, but he does. And then there's the fact that he freaked out when he got back the other day when I told him I was concerned about you."

"He... he what?" Against her will, happiness the hope was back again at the trooper's words. "He... panicked? Are you sure?"

"He did," the clone nodded. "I didn't even get to tell him my full report before he was all but running towards your room. He didn't even stop at first when his P.A. was trying to talk to him until he realized that the lieutenant was trying to tell him about you. And after a point I think he stopped listening to us all together, because he just took off again and went to your room, I assume."

It was all too much information, and it was scary how much it chased her doubt about what the Emperor had said away. It really scared her. Was it all right to feel this way with Vader? Was it all right to trust him? He'd been given every opportunity to betray her, to use and abuse her, but he hadn't. He'd stayed true to his word, he hadn't harmed her since the first day, and he hadn't taken advantage of her at all, not even when she was drunk. Things were indeed different between them, but Padmé just wished she knew in what way. Maybe she would have to test this, see how far she could go.

After a moment, realizing she wasn't eating again and Cory was glaring at her, Padmé began eating a chip, chewing it thoughtfully. "I see," she began carefully, before smiling over at the trooper. "And thank you, Cory. For everything. You're a real friend."

The trooper grinned broadly. It did her heart good to see it. "Do I still get invited to the wedding then?"

Good feeling was gone again. "Shut up, Cory."

## 24. The Gray

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Meetings with the Emperor were seldom brief and never pleasant. Walking back from one such meeting, Vader found himself extremely exhausted and in no small amount of pain. He'd delayed meeting with his master for a few days when he returned to Coruscant so he could get his mental facilities back in line before facing the elder Sith. Apparently that was a grave mistake. His master was extremely angry with him, and despite having that party to go to the first night after he came back, he had become even more enraged that his apprentice still hadn't come afterwards.

The old man was getting more and more suspicious of him all the time, and added on to that was the fact that the Emperor didn't understand why the Force was shifting. Of course Sidious hadn't voiced this out loud, but Vader knew it was so. The surges of Light were strong, but for whatever reason, Vader found he was able to mask their origins. It was most fortunate considering he would probably be dead by now if his master knew the truth.

When he made it to his rooms, the young man made it to his hyperbaric chamber before falling into his chair. As was custom by now, he had enough energy to pull off his helmet and mask before he just leaned back and closed his eyes, focusing on the pain, embracing it, before mastering it. It was the Sith way. It made him stronger.

Or so his master said. A scowl easily came back to the younger Sith's lips as he thought once more of his master. How he hated the man. He had lied to him about Dooku, had lied to him about his healing, so what else could Sidious have lied to him about? The possibilities were staggeringly grim.

A part of Vader wondered if he should try to heal himself. A good portion of himself whispered of the benefits it would do him. What good was holding on to the pain? It only made him suffer, drove him to near insanity. But then he always hesitated at this logic. He was unused to dealing with the Light Side, and he worried about the impact it would have on him. He'd ventured far enough away from the Darkness to enter the gray area in between the two sides, but no farther.

What if he just abandoned the Dark Side? What if he really did embrace the Light? Would he be weak, like his master said, or was that a lie? Would it change the person he was, creating a new man? Despite hating who and what he was now, it was better than the unknown, the uncertainty. What if he were to try and change, but he couldn't handle it? What if it ripped him apart?

Every passage he'd ever come across regarding the changing of sides was strictly for the followers of the Light falling to the Dark Side. Never the reverse. His master had told him once that it was impossible for those of the Dark Side to abandon it. Sidious had said it proved the correctness in following the Dark Side. Once a Dark Force-user, always a Dark Force-user...

So what did that make him? Vader had been a Sith almost his entire life. From a small child he'd learned to embrace hatred and fear, to use it to make him strong. Now, here he was,

sitting and contemplating leaving all that he'd even been taught behind to follow a teaching that was potentially incorrect and weaker. It was a horribly confusing, frightening thought. He did not want to give Darkness up. Not necessarily. There was security in facing the known. He knew the worst the Dark Side could throw at him, he wasn't sure about the Light.

And it was a matter of habit as well. Why would he give up all that he knew to embrace something completely foreign? It didn't make sense. There was no doubt in his mind that he'd be so lost and confused should he change. Not the mention that he would finally have to come face to face with all of the crimes he'd committed throughout the galaxy over the last several years. That, more than anything, terrified him. He didn't think he could handle it.

Instinctively reaching out, his hand hit the computer monitor, groping for the piece of necklace from so long ago. It wasn't there. Vaguely he remembered not seeing it since he'd gotten back. 3PO must have put it away like he'd asked. Just as well. He shouldn't even have that anymore. His master had told him to destroy it, that it would only make him weak, but he hadn't done it. In that instance he'd wanted that weakness. He didn't want to forget about...

But it didn't matter. No matter what he felt, he really shouldn't have gotten too attached to it. Whenever he was in a particularly melancholy mood he would usually take it out and hold it while he meditated. Over the last year or so he'd managed to keep it locked away where it couldn't hurt him, but the other week he'd needed it too badly and couldn't deny himself. Holding that stone piece was his way of holding on to the past, to hold the last remains of a time when he'd actually been happy. It hurt him to do so, excruciatingly so, but he couldn't help it. He needed to hold on to this. Because if he was going to be guilty over something for the rest of his life, it had to be for this.

It had been quite some time since Vader had actively thought about his homeworld or about his mother, but lately he couldn't stop her from entering into his mind, and so did not fight it anymore. Perhaps it was the Force's way of telling him something he needed to know. It would be reopening a wound, but he knew he had to. He already felt like shit, what was the worst that could happen now? Might as well deepen the wound and not have to do so later when freshly healed in mind and body again.

With his eyes closed, he allowed a mental picture of his mother to appear. His chest ached at just imagining her as she was. So warm and gentle, brown eyes soft and loving. She deserved better than a slaves life. So much better. She was a better being than anyone else in the galaxy. If the galaxy were made up of more people like his mother, everything would be perfect. There'd be no need for war or pain or jealousy. Everything would just be perfect.

But unfortunately, life was not fair and the best woman of the galaxy was robbed of even of the basic needs and necessities of life. She was robbed of hope or dignity. She worked so hard, was so kind and patient, it hurt to remember the times when the owners would beat her. She had never deserved any of the harsh punishments, but it had happened nonetheless. Vader felt anger and hatred flow through him as he recalled those times when his mother would cry, and he felt a deep sense of shame because he hadn't been able to do anything about it. His mother, the woman who loved and protected him, had been hurt, and all he'd done was watch.

The Sith's face scrunched up in pain as he remembered all of his failings as her son, but the most unbearable memory of all was remembering the day that she had died. He'd killed her. It had been an accident, he hadn't meant to! But that didn't change the facts. To this day

he didn't know what had gone wrong when he'd been working on that racer. One moment it all seemed fine, the next...

The image of his mother's lifeless body still haunted his dreams. He'd tried to go to her, tried to help her, but he couldn't move. He'd been too weak and pathetic to even stand, and after struggling, he'd passed out from the pain due to the minor explosion. When he'd woken up, he was already en route to his master's Sith retreat for his training, sold because his former master hadn't wanted to pay for the medical expenses to heal him. His mother hadn't survived. Her wounds had been far more severe.

A long time ago he'd cried for his mother, wept for her and her memory. Not a day had gone by that he did not regret her passing or the sorrow left him. Now he couldn't cry, the hurt was far too deep. Some days he was able to carry on better than others, but he never forgot. He never would. Shmi Skywalker had just been a nameless slave to the galaxy, but one day, Vader vowed to make her name known and revered. One day, when he ruled the galaxy, he would make sure no one ever forgot the kind woman that had raised him at least for a few short years.

He hated himself truly and deeply for what had happened. Everything else he'd done thus far in the galaxy was bad enough, but to murder your own mother? A woman who had loved you beyond all else? It hurt. If he was capable of killing a woman he adored, why should he stop destroying for lesser reasons? He'd become a powerful Sith, he'd wanted her to be proud.

But that voice of his former self whisper doubts in his ear. Despite how he tried to deny it, Vader couldn't see his mother being happy with all that he'd done. He'd killed so many with so little thought, he could very well image her horrified face. Despite his best efforts to twist the truth and to lie to himself, he knew she wouldn't be pleased with him and all that he'd done. Not even for the fact that he was doing this all in the memory of her, to give himself and others that had been like them a better life that he never had as a child.

How? By enslaving worlds? that wretched voice from within sneered.

Vader was too tired to argue with it, and instead allowed the words to echo through his mind. Now was not the time to argue with that other part of himself. Right now all he wanted to do was sit here in misery and allow himself the pleasure of fantasizing about his death. How nice it would be to not have to move about anymore, to not have to kill anymore or be attacked. He could just sit in the ground and rot.

But that's not what happens.

It was true. He'd sold his soul for the powers he now possessed. The moment he died he would be dragged to hell, kicking and screaming as he went. The pain there would probably be more painful than anything he'd encountered here in this life. Yet, Vader couldn't help but believe that it wouldn't be anything he didn't deserve. Already he was plagued with more guilt than what should be humanly possible, so hell would be just like any other day of his existence, except with perhaps more physical sensations of pain. He could deal with that. He'd had a lot of practice. It was the mental torment he wasn't looking forward to, although he knew he deserved it.



It was at least a comfort that his mother was resting peacefully wherever she was. His mother had done no harm to anyone or anything and borne her situation in life with more poise than anyone he'd ever met. There were moments when he wondered, though, if she might not be in hell because of him. He'd done so many atrocious things it didn't seem likely that he'd be able to endure all the punishments due. At one point, he'd feared his mother would be brought down for his sins. That would be hell, to see her suffering forever because of him. The idea had tortured him so badly he'd gone and looked through the old Jedi archive on the matter, hoping that it would be able to shed some light on the situation. Thankfully, what he had found said nothing about another person sharing in the sins of someone close to them. But there was still a hint of doubt.

No, his mother was at peace wherever she was, and that was the best peace that Vader would be able to find in this life. At least she wasn't suffering because of him anymore. He didn't have to worry about ever hurting her again.

But there was one who had become close to him that his mind now focused on, who he was currently making him miserable: Padmé. She was nothing like his mother, yet she was everything like. Padmé was fiercely independent and stubborn. She would not have made a good slave, not without being broken first. But the thought of her spirit gone left a sour taste in his mouth. That could never happen. He would see that it didn't.

Images of the senator at the party they attended several nights ago sprang to his mind. She had been nothing short of stunning. Even though he should not have let it affect him so much, Vader had actually been pleased to be seen beside her. She had easily been the most beautiful woman in the room. Others had looked at her with obvious appreciation and admiration, but at the end of the night, it was Vader who left with her, Vader who had rights to her. He hadn't taken her that night, still uneasy with their relationship with each other, but he could have and he would have certainly liked to. Of all the dresses he'd seen her wear, she'd looked the best in that one. Absolutely stunning.

Again, he began to labor over the issue of what they were to one another. They were lovers and he protected her. But even though he had figured out a while ago that he did indeed like her, he wasn't always certain how she felt about him. Before he'd gone to Geonosis, her feelings towards him had been warm and affection. When he'd come back, it was all but total hatred. Now, they were once again in the ambiguous middle area, the gray. It was that horrible twilight between certainty and oblivion.

Strangely, Vader realized that his thoughts on the Force were now linked to the senator. Most consistently, he was trapped in the gray area of the Force, between the Light and Darkness, uncertain what he should do or feel, just as he was when it came to Padmé. When he was with her, his Force signature was more Light, when he was away, more Dark. The easiest thing to do would be to get rid of Padmé as an influence and go back to the way things were before, where he was able to submerge himself into the Darkness and not worry about someone else's feelings, but the problem was he couldn't. Not anymore, anyway. Both the Light and Padmé had sunk themselves deeply into his life, and he couldn't get them out.

This was hell, he decided. He couldn't keep living like this. Sith Lords were not supposed to be this unsure of themselves. The longer he was like this, the more worried he became that his master would find out about what was happening to him. All his plans would be ruined!

Perhaps they already were. It was hard to tell with the older Sith. Maybe he had found out and was already plotting a retaliation of his own?

The content of their meeting floated back to his mind, and it caused Vader to scowl. Naboo. The Emperor wanted him to escort the senator to Naboo for the eleventh anniversary of their ability to expel the Trade Federation blockade and invasion. Vader remembered it well, remembered his master planning, but that was back when Sidious had another apprentice.

Vader snorted at the memory of the other Sith. He had gone down easily to his blade. Unlike Dooku, Vader hadn't underestimated Maul, had been patient. And what had made it all the more entertaining was the element of surprise that had come with it. Maul hadn't realized what had happened until it was too late. That had been the first time Vader had stepped up and truly became a Sith Lord. He'd passed the test and killed the other apprentice. The Rule of Two had prevailed.

Looking back on it, however, Vader couldn't help cringe at his younger self's tenacious desire to please his master. Maul had been easy to dispel because the other Sith hadn't expected it, and the young sixteen-year-old had been able to surprise him and made short work of him. After that, he'd begun to think of himself as invincible, and it had nearly cost him his life. What he wouldn't give to go back to that first time, his first real kill, and warn the boy not to do it. To run while he had the chance. But he couldn't and he hadn't. He hadn't because of his master.

Padmé had been all too right. He was a slave. He had been purchased as a slave and beaten like a slave. The shame burned deeply within him, but he couldn't make it stop. What was he supposed to do? He had never been free his entire life, and the thought of having no master was as intoxicating as it was frightening. But maybe he could do it. Maybe, with Padmé by his side, he could destroy his master and rule the galaxy as the new emperor.

It was a glorious thought, to do whatever they wanted, to make the galaxy just like they wanted it to be, but it was fanciful thinking only. Vader was a realist that bordered on pessimism. Padmé wouldn't want to rule the galaxy by his side, as empress or anything else. She loved her democracies and republic. She'd told him so herself. If he wished for her to be beside him, he would have to make some changes to the Empire in the future.

But this trip to Naboo could potentially halt all his plans. The Emperor was suspicious and Vader had a bad feeling about the events. It would occur within the next week, and he wasn't sure how he should feel about his assignment. Of course she would be thrilled to go back. She would no doubt smile at him and call her family. But it made Vader uneasy. Even though he hated Coruscant, it was the new Sith stronghold. Naboo was far in the Outer Rim regions of space. That's where the Rebels lurked. What if they found out and staged an attack? What if they took Padmé away from him?

That last thought was more distressing than any possible attack could ever be. He knew she was a rebel, had known that from the beginning, but what if she were to get away, to free herself? She would be gone, and where would that leave him? He would not only be left with a disaster on his hands and his master's displeasure to face, but he wasn't sure he could make it without her anymore. Somewhere along the way of their strange relationship he'd grown to depend on her to be a constant presence in his life. Her annoying bright Force signature, her

brown eyes, and the way she moved were all soothing to him now. Her smiles made him feel like nothing else ever had, but her scowls crushed him more thoroughly than anything else ever had. She was the only thing that gave him a taste of freedom in his otherwise trapped existence.

The point of the matter was that he was in deep. Somewhere along the way he'd lost control of the situation. In the beginning this had all seemed so easy, that he would manipulate her and use her to gain control of the galaxy, but now... now he wasn't sure anymore. They were both using each other for their own gains, and both of them knew that. But somehow, the senator was the one who came out the better for all this, because she had done something no one else ever had: she controlled Vader's actions. At least in part. She made him pause, think, use powers in the Force that he'd sworn to forsake. And what had started out as a simple plan had now snowballed into a disastrous mess in all areas of his life.

Thinking like this only served to make him more confused than ever before. Why did he allow this to happen? There was an easy answer, but he just couldn't grasp it. He was still so new to all these emotions; he wasn't sure how to process them. It made him want to give up, but he refused to do so. It went against everything he stood for.

Just when he forced his mind into quiet, the door chimed. Someone was at his door. Anger swelled in him until he realized who it was. Feeling overwhelmingly tired, he forced himself to stand and walk over to the door as he replaced his mask and helmet over his face. He couldn't bring himself to even pretend to be upset that she'd had to come now, not even to himself.

When the door opened, Padmé stared up at him, and for some reason she seemed confused to see him. Maybe she hadn't thought he be here yet? True it was only twenty-hundred hours, but still. This was his room, why would she be surprised he was here?

He didn't say anything, just stared down at her as she looked up at him. She was nervous about something, but he waited for her to speak. When it appeared that she really wasn't going to say anything, he crossed his arms over his chest, to get his point across. She blushed slightly, as she held out her hand to him. He stared at it, not knowing what it meant.

Apparently he had done something amusing as she smiled at him slightly, and reached out and took his hand in hers. It was strange, no one had ever volunteered to touch him before, and she had only ever done so when blindfolded. It was quite a different experience to have her do so voluntarily when he was clad in his full Sith Lord apparel. When had she really become so comfortable with him? Or maybe she was really just this audacious?

When he felt her tug his hand, he realized that she wanted him to follow her. While normally he wouldn't, he obliged. She was such a tiny woman, she could hardly make him do anything he didn't want to do.

Surprisingly, she led her to her bedroom and he realized the lighting was dim. She smiled at him, not saying a word, before she left him standing in the middle of her room as she went into the 'fresher. Something was happening here, but he wasn't sure what. His breathing quickened despite his best efforts to keep calm. Last time he'd been in here he'd nearly choked her to death, and now she'd led him here. Why?

After a few moments of staring awkwardly around the room, Padmé returned from the 'fresher clad in absolutely nothing. If it hadn't been for the respirator forcing air into his lungs, Vader wouldn't be breathing at the moment. Her cheeks were flushed, but she stared up into his eyes, meeting them as if she knew exactly where they were. And as she walked over to the night stand, she took his hand in hers.

When she reached out and pulled out the blindfold, he knew what she wanted. It amazed him. She wanted sex with him? It was the first time she'd ever expressed a desire to be with him like this all on her own without him pushing. He had had theories of her liking him, but for her to want him? This was... much more than anything he could have hoped for.

In a matter of seconds, his mask and helmet were lying at the foot of the bed, and he tore off his gloves. He winced in pain, knowing that moving at all was a chore, but he couldn't let this opportunity pass him by. It was the first time she had responded to him in such a way and he would not leave her unsatisfied. He could not. If she wanted this, he would give it to her, even if it hurt him in the process.

It took several minutes for him to peel out of his suit, and he managed to stifle any cry that might have tried to escape in the process. He hated showing weakness, and he would not let her hear it or sense it. It was not her concern and it was nothing he hadn't handled before.

Seeing her in all her glory, waiting for him, sensing her desire, Vader decided that he could afford stripping down fully as she had for the first time, save for the glove to place back over his mechanical hand. He'd often wondered what it would be like to press against her fully, skin against skin, and tonight he was going to find out. He had to.

Sitting down next to her, he put a hand on her cheek, loving how smooth her skin felt. Truly she was perfect. Truly there was no one as wonderful as she was. Leaning forward, he kissed her. She responded eagerly, which continued to amaze him. How could this woman feel this way after all he'd done to her?

But soon he couldn't be wondering about all of that as she was pressing herself against him, her breasts against his chest. A moan escaped him before he realized what happened. How wonderful this felt, the simple touch and contact. Not since his mother had died had he felt any sort of physical comfort or pleasure. He couldn't get enough of it. But when he was with Padmé it was... intoxicating.

Somehow, even with a blindfold, Padmé crawled into his lap and straddled him, pressing herself against him further, attacking him with kisses. A sense of embarrassment filled him as he realized she could feel how much he wanted her already, but he tried to block it off and surrender fully to the moment, to the sensations that this tiny woman could elicit from him. He could feel her need just as clearly as she could feel his. They were together in this.

Carefully laying her down on the bed, Vader had to take several deep breaths to just breathe and control the pain that threatened to overcome him. But he would not give in to it. He would not let it ruin this moment.

Slowly, deliberately, he began placing strategic kisses on her throat, around her ears, and down towards her breast. She was squirming beneath him, whimpering and mewling, and it only added to Vader's desires. How perfect she was, how glorious. And she was his. She was

giving herself to him freely. That above anything else gave him a sense of pride that nothing else ever had.

When he entered her, it was slow and gentle. Their last time together had been fevered, almost rushed. It would not be so this time. He would make this last as long as he could, because right now, he was in pain and he needed this comfort, her warmth. He needed to be as close to her as he possibly could. Without understanding, he even sought out the mental link he'd connected to her.

This time, as they came together, they shared kisses, and instead of clawing at his back, she was rubbing it, massaging. At first it was painful, but he embraced it as the actions were done out of affection, and he returned the favor with gentle kisses and deliberate strokes. She continued to moan under him, and he found that as he watched her enjoy this, enjoy him, his chest tightened with a feeling he couldn't quite place. Without recognizing his actions, he sent his feelings to her over their link, pouring them out to her and gaining hers in return. He had to get closer to her. It was a necessity.

While their blood boiled, needing release, neither rushed. Together they burned, and would melt into one another. This was what they needed, to be with one another, both thinking of the other's need before their own. Right now they weren't a Sith Lord or a Galactic Senator. They were just them. It was so wonderfully freeing.

At last, they both came together, panting and sweating over each other. Vader came down on top of her, utterly exhausted and his body humming. It had felt so wonderful to be able to relieve himself this way of all the stress, the confusion, and the misery. But after a several long moments, the pain came licking back into his consciousness and with it the realization that he was probably crushing the life out of Padmé.

He rolled over and stared up at the ceiling, his brain completely shut down. He was exhausted and it felt so wonderful to actually be able to stretch out like this. He'd denied his body such basic pleasures so long ago he'd almost forgotten what this was like. When was the last time he'd actually had a bed? Had he ever had one?

As he began getting up, a small hand grabbed his arm. Looking down, the senator sat up, and her face was turned to where he was. "Don't go," she said quietly, sleepily. "Stay with me?"

Vader was torn between his want and his duty. There was still so much he had to do, so many reports and plans that needed attention. But staring at her in that moment, her hair tussled and mussed from their intercourse, he couldn't refuse her. She had such a strange power over him, he couldn't deny her the simple request, even if he would regret it later.

Sinking back down slowly, he laid on his back looking up at the ceiling once more. He was a bit surprised to feel Padmé curl up next to him, placing her arm around his torso and laying her head on his shoulder. Was this snuggling? He didn't know, but he was finding he didn't mind it. Her hair tickled his skin, and thought his body still ached from the Emperor's punishment, he found he didn't care. As long as this made her happy, who was he to deny her?

Tomorrow he would worry about reports and plans. Tomorrow he would worry about the pain and the Emperor. Right now, Vader's sole attention was captured by the woman beside

him. He might have regrets later, but right now, he was still in the moment, and soon felt his eyes grow heavy, even as Padmé's gentle breathing lulled him to sleep.

It was the first peaceful slumber he had had in many, many years, not worrying about Light or Dark or the ominous gray that would come with the morning.

## 25. Promise

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The next morning Padmé found herself waking up alone. For a moment she was disoriented and confused, having only the vague memory of falling asleep warm and contented. But now there was something missing. Sitting up, she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, when it hit her: Vader was gone.

Looking around, there was not one piece of dark fabric lying on the floor save for the blindfold that must have slipped off during the night. Even the other side of the bed looked neater and more kept than the side she had slept on. Had he really stayed with her? She remembered him laying back down when she'd asked him, but maybe he had only stayed until she'd fallen asleep? Maybe he'd gotten up much earlier to work? She wasn't sure, but all she really knew now was he was gone.

The thought disturbed her. She had decided to conduct an experiment to see how far his concern for her went, if he really did care about her like Cory seemed to think, and this was the result. Like always, Vader had disappeared after he'd had his fun with her. It left her feeling cold and cheap.

But surely she hadn't imaged what had passed between them last night? They never spoke, not really, but there had been so much feeling last night. It had actually startled the senator. While she was beginning to learn that Vader wasn't as emotionless as he made himself out to be, she had never felt that much from him before that wasn't solely centered around anger. Something had passed between them, something she was sure she was the only one to ever experience with him, and it only added to her theory that he loved her.

Maybe he just didn't understand the expectations of him in this sort of situation? Or maybe he really just didn't care about them. Maybe he had a good excuse to get up and actually work on something. Maybe he was of a species that didn't sleep long, or maybe he was just anxious? The possibilities were endless, and Padmé decided that she shouldn't try and think too deeply on this. Vader was still very much an anomaly in so many areas, and she should consider last night a grand success because he'd actually stayed.

A stupid smile came to her lips at the thought. Darth Vader, Heir to the Emperor, the man that did not negotiate, had given in and stayed with her. It had only taken a little plead and a slight pout and he'd immediately responded and given in. She suddenly realized what this meant: She had power over Lord Vader.

This was no small feat. Standing up, Padmé wandered into the bathroom to take her shower and ponder over what she'd discovered. While it might not seem like much if it were anyone else, it was incredibly huge when it came to Vader. Somehow, somehow, she had gained something over him, she was beginning to be able to manipulate him. If he really did love her, she could take advantage of this situation. Who knew, perhaps she could even get him to tell her things, beg him to do bigger and bigger things as their relationship progressed?

But even as tempting as the thought of getting more information for the Alliance was, Padmé knew she couldn't do this to Vader. When it came to emotions, she wasn't one to take

advantage of people, at least outside of the political ring. People's feelings were their own business, and the only time she tried to manipulate them was to make a political point. But when it came to personal relationships...?

No, she couldn't do that. Not even to someone like Darth Vader. Even if she wanted to, Padmé knew she probably would have had to think about it carefully. Somehow she couldn't see Vader taking it very well should he learn she was playing with him. She would probably not survive that encounter with him that was for sure. She'd gotten away with yelling at him, but she got the feeling that if she actually wounded him deeply emotionally, he'd wound her just as deeply physically.

But the problem with this wasn't even that she didn't like treating people this way, it was more of the fact that she knew she felt something for him too. Biting her lips, Padmé tried to think of everything she hated about the man she'd asked to stay with her, and even though the list was long, it was also complicated. So complicated in fact, that she found she couldn't hate him. Not exactly. When she was with him it was so... different.

Last night especially, it had almost seemed as though she could... feel him. In her mind. It was entirely possible because of his powers, but it hadn't felt like what she imagined it would. It was something warm and sad and loving. For a split second, it had felt like he opened himself up to her completely, not saying a word, but showing her himself. It had nearly made her cry, but it had gone before she could really understand what it had been.

Even as she continued to resist, it was becoming obvious to her that it was all a waste of time. Despite all reason or good sense, she was falling in love with Vader. She didn't love him for what she saw or what he let everyone see, it was for those things he didn't show, that no one else knew about. Even with her the moments were rare, but he still peeled himself open to let her in, even the tiniest bit. Coming from him, it was touching and must have taken incredible strength.

Sighing, it was with the utmost sadness that Padmé realized she'd spent too much time bathing and would have to get ready for work. She didn't want to go to work today. She wanted to stay home and think. All this up and down of her emotions was taking its toll on her, and she felt almost sea sick from it all. But she would feel better once she actually started working and took her mind and emotions off of Vader. Idly she wondered how much she could have accomplished these last long months of her confinement if she'd actually focused on work and not him. He had become too much of a favorite topic for her to dwell on.

Once she was dressed and ready to go, Padmé was just about to grab her cloak when the door opened. It was Vader, of course. Turning, she gave him a small smile and went back to gathering her things. "Just one second more," she said, not bothering to look at him.

He said nothing, the sound of his respirator her only response. But she didn't take it personally. He was just being Vader, the quiet Sith Lord that seemed surprisingly sneaky when it served his purpose. Still she wondered how he could remain silent until the last second, when it was too late.

Once she had collected everything she needed for the day, she turned back to the Sith and gave another small smile before they set off down the hall in silence and into the lift. Using the excuse that it was cramped, Padmé pressed herself up against the Dark Lord, wondering if he would move to maintain his space. He did not, and if she didn't know any better, the



senator would have thought she had felt just the slightest bit of pressure being pushed back at her.

When they exited the lift, however, she made sure to give Vader his space as Cory was there now, ever watchful and vigilant. While Arlo began briefing Vader on his daily meetings and the like, Padmé tried to watch the Sith out of the corner of her eye while trying not to look like she was. Again, with the trooper there, she didn't want to risk anything, but she still couldn't help the silly impulses she was getting this morning to tease him. It was dangerous, seeing as he probably didn't even understand what teasing was, but all the same.

When they reached the hanger lift, the senator smiled at the lieutenant, wishing him a good day, before riding down. When they made it to the speeder, Vader strode right in, Padmé following, while the trooper went to the back, as usual, to wait until they arrived at the senate. Now that it was just the two of them, she had the idea to bring up some sort of conversation. She didn't know what, but there was some sort of tense static between them, and she wondered at it.

But before she could speak, Vader beat her to it. "You are to be ready to leave for about a week's worth of time Friday," he stated flatly. "Be sure to bring all that you may require."

This was certainly not what she had expected. "Leaving?" A horrible idea popped into her head. "You mean you're sending me away?"

"I will be accompanying you."

It was both distressing and comforting at the same time. Distressing because it meant that she was still under his watch and the hope of being free was crushed. Comforting because it meant she wasn't getting switched into a worse situation, and she would not have to be away from him. It would be misfortunate indeed if she were to be separated from him before she could concretely and without hesitation decide how she felt about him.

"Where are we going?" she asked. The idea of some sort of fieldtrip was a welcoming distraction as much as an interesting idea. Although she knew she shouldn't get her hopes up when it came to the destination. If she was going with Vader he was probably taking her to some cold, desolate planet.

"Naboo," he said simply.

Padmé's heart hammered in her chest at the name. Could it be? Had he really just said...

"N-Naboo?" her voice came out quiet, almost timid.

"Yes," he confirmed patiently.

"Why?" This was really all too good to be true. She couldn't believe it. Home! She was going home!

Vader turned to stare at her, all the while piloting through the dense traffic with ease. She'd long become accustomed to his rather suicidal driving and instead stared right back at him. "Shouldn't you know the answer to that?" he asked drily.

While she didn't really appreciate his attitude, it did trigger her memory enough for her to recall what day it would soon be. "The anniversary!" she exclaimed, a smile spreading wide

over her face. “You’re really taking me home for the anniversary?” She just couldn’t believe it!

“Don’t make the mistake that this is a vacation, Senator,” he growled in a way that she knew meant he was uncomfortable, but was trying to hide it. “I was ordered by the Emperor to take you for the festivities. I had nothing to do with the situation.”

Even though he was being a jerk, it was sort of funny how defensive he was being. He had no reason to be defensive. If the Emperor ordered him to Naboo, then that was it. Of course she knew that he wouldn’t just sweep her away for some grand vacation. The thought hadn’t entered her mind, but it was interesting how it must have entered his. Which made her wonder, had he wanted to do something like that for her? Was he upset that this wasn’t his idea and that this was merely another business trip?

A smirk came to her face that she didn’t bother hiding. “Right. I never thought anything else.”

Even with the mask on his face, she knew he was glaring at her. It only brightened her mood. “So what are you going to be doing while I’m with my family?”

“I’ll be with you at all times,” he informed her crisply. She must have ruffled his feathered a little too much.

“Okay... but what about when I’m just with them? Where will you be staying?” she asked suddenly getting a bad feeling about all this.

“With you,” he said again. “And we will be staying at the Theed Palace.”

Padmé frowned. “No,” she said firmly. “I will be staying with my parents. You can stay at the palace if you want, but I haven’t seen my family in half a year. I’m staying with them.”

“No. You’re not.”

Suddenly he wasn’t as funny or cute anymore with his attitude. “Yes. I am.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “I live with my parents, and I’m going to be comfortable while I’m on Naboo. I’m not going to stay at the palace.”

“Perhaps you have forgotten who is in control,” Vader hissed, and a dark, cold feeling filled the speeder. He was really getting annoyed now. “You have no say in this decision. It is my duty to watch over you, and we will be staying that the palace.”

There really was no arguing with him when he was like this. At least not any productive arguing. But Padmé couldn’t stand the thought of being on Naboo and not being with her family. The past six months have been hard. Very hard. She really needed a vacation, even if it was in appearances only. If she didn’t think fast, she would lose the chance to finally after too long to spend some time with her family and be comfortable.

“What if you stayed at my parents’ house with me?” she blurted out only to wince after. She didn’t need to feel Vader’s incredulousness to know how stupid it sounded. “I’m serious,” she pushed on.

Vader was silent for a long moment, and it didn’t give Padmé anymore hope. In fact, she was willing to bet that he was stunned speechless by her idiocy. It really was an

accomplishment of some sort to render him speechless, but she didn't feel like bragging about it.

"At least consider it," she begged.

"No."

"Why?" she asked. "There's an extra room."

"Because not only would it be grossly inappropriate, but your parents' home no doubt lacks the security needed to watch over you," he stated tartly. "I would have to post Storm Troopers around the entire area to secure it."

Inappropriate? Had he really considered that? Despite what rumors said, they were not dating and they were certainly not boyfriend and girlfriend. It wasn't that she was bringing home a suitor... not exactly. It was strange that he would have even thought about something like that.

But back to the matter at hand, she thought about his argument again. "Then order troopers to watched out for me," she shrugged. She hated to think of her parents' home being surrounded like some sort of prison, but she wanted to go home too badly and knew her family would understand. If this is what it took to be able to feel wholly and completely loved again, as well as to just be able to sleep in her own bed again, she would do it.

Vader didn't respond to her suggestion, however, and she realized that he probably wasn't going to. He seemed oddly defensive, almost jittery today. Maybe last night had affected him more than she had thought. It made her smile. There was no denying he had done evil and was a jerk, but he was also strangely... endearing. But this could only be understood after long periods of exposure and getting under his skin if he didn't kill you first. It actually made her wonder what sort of man he was within that suit. What sort of person became Darth Vader? A young man with no family to speak of and no other choice? Or a young man that had nothing to lose and groped for power?

They made it to the senate at the same time as always. They exited together with Cory in tow, walking through the building in an almost companionable silence despite their disagreement earlier. It was still quiet and Padmé found she felt more relaxed than she had in a while.

"You might wish to contact your family," Vader spoke up as they neared her office.

Turning, she smiled up at him. "You'll let me?"

He didn't bother to answer her on that. "You will only be there as long as the festivities require your presence," he went on, as though he hadn't heard her. "They should plan accordingly."

"Very well," she nodded. "I'll tell them that you'll be tagging along with me."

The Sith Lord stopped, crossing his arms, and again, she knew he was glaring at her. "I do not 'tag along' with anyone, Senator," he snapped.

Padmé put her hands on her hips, smirking up at him confidently. "When you're on Naboo with me, you do," she proclaimed assuredly. "You might rule on Coruscant, but on Naboo, I'm the big-shot, and you'll have to take orders from me."

Of course she was just messing with him, and even though he appeared to be angry, she knew he understood what she was doing, at least in part. It made her smile. Darth Vader might just have a sense of humor.

“Don’t be too proud of this grandiose public image you’ve constructed for yourself,” he pointed at her accusingly. “Your influence and power is insignificant next to that of the Emperor.”

Despite it sounding reproaching, Padmé could just make out a tiny hint of amusement. Sighing, she held up her hands in defeat, scowling up at him with mock-frustration. “You would have to bring up the only Naboo more famous than me,” she pouted.

Vader just crossed his arms again, before pointing towards her door. “Get to work, Senator.”

A sarcastic remark burned on the tip of her tongue and she wanted to roll her eyes at him, but didn’t. She’d pushed the envelope a little more just this morning, she didn’t want to ruin the last twelve or so hours by making him angry. It was just so easy to do, after all. She wanted to keep this day light.

So instead, she did as she was bid, giving an exaggerated curtsy before she turned and entered her office. Cory followed her dutifully, and together they made it to the suite. When she walked through the door, she saw Jar Jar reading through a report. “Pack your bags, my friend,” she called to him, catching the attention of all her staff. “Friday we’re leaving for Naboo.”

A cheer went up from every inhabitant of the planet, even as the trooper stood back near the door watching. She took the time to answer some excited questions from her exhausted staff. Because of her, they had all been watched closely by Vader and other Imperial officials, and there was no doubt in Padmé’s mind that they all just wanted to go home as badly as she did. It had been too long since they’d seen their lush, green world or been off this crowded gray planet. It was definitely time for a change.

When she had explained everything, the senator went to her office and turned her attention to the terminal. Vader had said she could call her family, and that’s what she wanted to do. But when she sat down, she noticed she had a message waiting for her attention. She knew that signal.

Calling quickly, Padmé smoothed over her hair before she composed herself. This was no time to be thinking about Vader or home or acting like a child. She had business to conduct now.

When the clear image of Queen Jamillia came into view, the senator bowed her head in respect of her sovereign. “Your highness,” she said lowly.

“Senator Amidala,” the queen began calmly. “Are you well?”

“Perfectly, your highness,” Padmé replied just as serenely. “I seem, however, to have missed your last call.”

“Yes,” the queen drawled a moment, looking the other woman over carefully. “I wanted to inform you that I made a formal request to the Emperor to have you back on Naboo for the eleventh anniversary. He has complied.”

"I have heard," the senator nodded. "Thank you, your highness. It was your request which obviously brought this much needed distraction about."

Jamillia held up her hand. "There is nothing to thank, Senator. You have been from home too long. We have things to discuss."

Queen Jamillia was known for her business-like attitude that didn't give way to much emotional appeal. It was in part what made her a successful politician. It both pleased and saddened Padmé, however. She had been hoping for more of a bright smiles, or pleasant attitude at the very least. She received none. But then again, for appearances sake, they never knew who was watching, it was probably good that they weren't overly familiar with one another.

"All the same," she replied gently. "If that is all, your highness, I should let you attend to your business there as I should mine here. We will be talking very soon."

The other woman nodded calmly. "Very well. Until then."

When the queen disconnected the call, Padmé could hardly wait and counted to three before dialing in her parents' com link and waited impatiently for them to answer. She couldn't wait to tell them!

When she was finally connected, she blinked in surprise for a moment when Darred's face came on the screen. "Hello, Nabberrie residence, this i—Padmé!" he exclaimed with a wide grim. 'Hey everyone!' he shouted over his shoulder. "It's Padmé!"

In what seemed like mere seconds, everyone was crowded around the screen, trying to get a look at their long-lost family member. "Hi, everyone!" she smiled brightly.

"Padmé!" they all seemed to cry.

"Sweetheart, are you all right?" her mother asked, concern written all over her features.

"Why haven't you called back sooner?" her father frowned.

"At least she called you!" Sola scowled at her sister. "What's with you talking to mom and dad and not even bother to call me, huh?"

Even in the face of accusation, Padmé laughed. Oh she had missed even her big sister's sass. "Sorry, Sola, but last time my call had been very limited."

"Excuses, excuses," Sola rolled her eyes, before sobering, playfulness gone. "But how are you? Really?"

The younger woman refused to let her emotions get the better of her this time. "I'm fine," she stressed. "I'm perfectly fine."

Even as her sister's face didn't lose its dubiousness, her mother smiled warmly at her. "Good. Oh, I'm so glad to hear it!"

"So how are the girls?" Padmé asked before her sister could interrogate her further. Sola had a knack for seeing through Padmé's well told half-truths.

Darred rolled his eyes. "As rambunctious and tenacious as ever," he moaned, though there was a hint of a laugh in his voice. "They're excited about the festivities coming up and keep

telling all the other kids at school that it's because of their aunt that the planet gets a party."

Once more Padmé found herself laughing. She hadn't in what felt like forever. It was wonderful. "Well, tell them I'm glad I could give them a party," she smiled fondly at the thought of her nieces. 'Which reminds me,' she came closer to the screen. "For the anniversary, would it be all right if I come stay with you?"

Just as she had hoped, everyone appeared completely stunned by this new, except for Sola, but Sola was hard to ruffle. "You're coming home?" Darred smiled brightly.

"Of course you can!" Jobal cried at the same time her husband snorted, "What kind of question is that?"

"You are always welcome here, sweetheart," her mother went on. "I'm so happy to hear you are coming home!"

"Does this mean that the Emperor has realized you don't need to be watched at all hours of the day anymore?" Ruwee asked with an edge to his voice.

Padmé tried not to squirm under her father's hard stare. "Not exactly," she admitted, "but I do get to come home!"

In the back of her mind, she wondered how angry Vader would be with her once he found out she made arrangements to stay with her folks. But then he hadn't really given her a final verdict or put their argument this morning to an official close. It was his own fault, she reasoned, even though she knew it was probably a bad idea to think this way. But she did have a power over Vader, maybe she would use it this time. Just this once.

Her family didn't look exactly pleased with this announcement, but bless his soul, Darred tried to look positive despite being in the mix of all the Naberries. "Well, that's good news at least!" he cried, giving her a small smile. "I'm glad you're coming home, Padmé. You've been away too long."

"You have," her mother nodded quickly, looking close to tears. "I'm so pleased that my baby will finally be coming back."

"I'm glad too," Padmé nodded earnestly. "I could use a few days to just be at home and not think too hard about anything."

She chatted pleasantly with her family for several minutes before there was a slight lull in conversation. It wouldn't have been a big deal, except Sola was looking uncomfortable the longer they talked and at last couldn't keep silent. "Is Lord Vader coming with you?"

Blinking, not really expecting the question, Padmé nodded slowly. "He'll be coming to Naboo, yes," she admitted. "The Emperor is still... concerned for my safety and wants to make sure that nothing happens."

"Because of that assassination attempt," Sola replied drily. It wasn't a question.

Something was up with her sister, but Padmé couldn't exactly tell what. It was obvious that Sola didn't trust the situation her sister had gotten into, and quite frankly, had she been in her sister's shoes, she wouldn't have either. But there was something more to this, she could just tell. But what was it?

Slowly, the younger sibling nodded. “Yes, I suppose that’s part of it. Why?” she asked.

The older Naberrie girl shrugged, suddenly looking aloof. “Just wanted to know so I could plan accordingly.”

“Accordingly for what?” Padmé frowned in suspicion.

Sola apparently didn’t like that tone of voice as she scowled at her sister. “So I can plan on how far away to keep my children from the Sith Lord. You might claim not to have a problem being around him all the time, but Force knows I will not let him anywhere near my babies.”

Despite knowing that Vader was changing—as minute as those changes were—Padmé had to admit her sister was probably right. Darth Vader wasn’t a people person by any stretch of the imagination, it was a safe bet that he wasn’t a kid person either. It was actually sort of scary to image him with children. She could just see her nieces being trapped in the same room as the Sith. One whine, one cry and those precious little girls could be dead.

“Right,” she muttered with a nod suddenly feeling very melancholy. “That’s a good idea. But I’m sure he wouldn’t do anything to them... if they were well behaved.” She winced at how horrible that had come out.

Of course Sola noticed, and snorted. “Padmé,” she sighed, ‘I will never understand how you can be so compassionate and optimistic about people.’ She paused. “Don’t let anyone take advantage of you because of it, or you tell your big sister and I’ll come beat them up.”

The younger sister chuckled. “You mean like you did when I was six when that boy pulled my hair?”

“Exactly,” Sola grinned. “He left you alone afterwards, didn’t he?”

Padmé smiled, leaning forward. “Yeah, I’m not sure kicking Lord Vader in the shins will make him run off crying for his mother like it did Donis.”

Again, Sola shrugged. “You never know.”

“You are something else, Sola,” Padmé laughed. “But thanks. I’ll keep that in mind. I might even have to warn Lord Vader about you.”

“Please do,” the other Naberrie sister smiled. “I’ve gotten pretty good at kicking people.”

“Tell me about!” Darred exclaimed, giving Padmé a look in mock-horror.

Sola slapped at her husband playfully as Padmé laughed at them. Truly Darred and Sola were a good match. Darred was too good natured and easy going that he would be easily taken advantage of if it weren’t for Sola, while alternatively, Darred could help Sola relax and see the bright side of anything. They completed each other very well, like two different halves of a whole.

Seeing the obvious affection and love between the two left a hollow ache in Padmé’s chest. Once more she was confronted by her desires and yearning for a family of her own, and it mixed in with her feeling for Vader. Could Darth Vader ever be the one to provide her with a family? Could he be the other half of herself? He was so dark compared to the sweet Darred, almost too dark. What sort of husband would he be—if indeed he ever intended to marry at all? She couldn’t even image it, let alone him being a father.

“Padmé, sweetie, are you all right?” her mother’s voice was gentle, bringing her from her thoughts.

“I’m fine,” she plastered on her best politician face. “Though I think I might have to go now. I’ll see you all very soon, though.”

“All right, but call us when you’re about to leave so we know about what time you’ll get here,” her father said, ever the concerned parent.

“I will,” Padmé promised.

“And don’t forget to rest up,” her mother added. “I know this is exciting, but you’ll need your rest if you’re to attend the celebrations and give your annual speech.”

The younger woman rolled her eyes. “Yes, mom.”

“Bye, sis,” Sola waved. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye, Sola. Goodbye everyone! I love you!”

A chorus of “goodbye!” and “I love you too!” was heard before the connection was dropped and Padmé was left alone once more in her office. Even though she had loved seeing her family, and she should be excited and distracted about going home, she couldn’t help turn her mind back to her sister and Darred. They were just so happy together...

Slumping down in her chair, Padmé turned over all she knew of Vader in her mind. The impatient, demanding Sith Lord... a father? No, she just couldn’t see it. And did she really want him to father her children? Didn’t her future children deserve a good man as a father? Of course they did! But why would she think that Vader could fill that role? He was anything but a good man.

But there was the affection and love she’d felt last night. Vader might not understand basic emotions, but he was protective and strong. He could certainly care and protect a family should he chose to have one. He had said that Padmé would be his last woman, that there would be no one else after her, so if he really wanted children someday, it would be with her... but could she really have children with such a man? Could she really unleash some sort of mini-Vader upon the world? Would a child she had with Vader turn into something like him? Cold, angry, and with those strange Force powers of his? Would it kill and destroy worlds like its father?

Sighing, Padmé grabbed a pad to work on. She had to stop thinking so much. Why was she thinking of children in the first place? And with Vader no less! He was no father, and he never would be. She should be disturbed that she was even thinking about procreating with the man! Was she crazy?! Apparently. Even more so because of the emptiness she felt over the thought of never being a mother and giving probably the last male in the galaxy that should have children a family.

Vader wasn’t the only one to make promises, as in that moment, Padmé knew that, like the Sith, there would be no other after him. For better or worse, she knew she could never get close to anyone else after him.



## 26. Steps

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There were moments when Vader really didn't know how he had gotten into this mess. One moment he's a little slave boy living with his mother, the next he's a slave in Sith Lord's armor. As he knelt before his master, fighting the scream that wanted to work its way past his throat and out of his mouth, laboring to control his body so that he wasn't reduced to a wreathing pile of black cloth, he wondered how he had gotten to this.

Somewhere in his mind, while trying to block out the pain, Vader retreated to his inner most self, the only place that his master had not seen, the only place he could not get to. While here, the young Sith was able to ignore the pain, even though he felt it. Nothing could get him here. He was quite detached, and he was only vaguely aware of the lightning still ravaging through his nerves, of how his mechanical arm was sparking and sending greater waves of electricity through his flesh. Here, he was able to breathe.

There was no reason for his master to be doing this to him today. There was no reason why his master should even want to see him at all today. He had commanded Vader prepare everything for the journey to Naboo. But here he was, torturing his apprentice for no reason. It was not uncommon to do so, but punishments like this hadn't happened since he had still been a child. Now that they had the Empire, Vader had been sure that such things were behind them for good. Apparently not. Apparently the Emperor was furious with him, though the answer to the reason was unsure. He was suspicious, but over what was anyone's guess.

This was nothing more than a display of power. The Emperor was feeling insecure and wanted to make sure Vader remembered who was in charge. Who the master was. Like it mattered. Vader knew who and what his master was. He knew that Sidious was powerful. Vader would have been a fool to forget that, to underestimate the old man. No, he'd underestimated someone only once, and it had cost him, cost him enough that he would never repeat the mistake again.

Eventually, the Emperor got bored with his torturing, and allowed his apprentice to go. It took several eternal seconds before Vader could pick himself up, bow to his master, before he walked away. His master said something to him, but he didn't really hear it. He assumed he'd answered back correctly when his master merely sneered at him and flicked his hand, indicating he could go. Vader didn't really remember the conversation as it was taking all of his strength and will to stand and not pass out.

This could not keep happening. This had to stop. And so Vader decided that it was time to set things into motion. He'd been waiting for a while now, going slow as not to alert his master of anything unusual, but now it was his turn to strike back. He just had to wait a little bit longer...

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Cadet Firmus Piett sat nervously in the shuttle that was descending from the Vengeance and towards Coruscant's capital. His face was pale and he was sweating too much, but he worked hard to keep control of himself. It was hard, though, especially since the officers kept

looking at him suspiciously. From the looks of it, it appeared as though he was guilty over something, had something to hide. But that wasn't the case. No, it was really the opposite. He had nothing to hide, except the desire to hide himself away from sight. He was terrified.

While he could not remember doing anything wrong, Piett knew that it had something to do with Lord Vader. He had met the Sith twice before informally, terrified both times, but had come out alive. He knew he wouldn't be so lucky this time. Last time he had actually spoken to the Sith, he had asked for Firmus's name. That wasn't a good sign. He had obviously taken his name to extract punishment later. But for the life of him, the young Cadet couldn't recall what his crime might be!

At last, the shuttle landed at the military and navy base near the Palace of the Emperor. Piett had never been here before. Indeed, he was a nobody, someone not worth a second glance. But if he was going to die, he might as well take in the sights and be proud that he had finally made it here. Not exactly under the circumstances he would have liked, but still. He had promised himself that one day he'd be walking this base, and so here he was. Too bad he was going to die.

The troopers that had been assigned to escort him here stood and exited, followed by the officers that believed that they were more important than anyone, and then lastly, him. The officers all gave him a passing sneer before walking away with their noses in the air. Firmus walked more slowly, trying to delay the inevitable. The hanger bay, he noticed, was massive with all different types of small ships, shuttles, and speeders. Some he had never seen before, and besides the Imperial standard speeders and shuttles, no other two pieces of vehicles were the same. It was like a museum of flying machines, Piett noticed.

"Come on!" one of the troopers snapped.

The young Cadet jumped slightly before turning and walking towards the troopers, his head almost bowed in defeat. But he tried not to give them anymore suspicions of him being guilty. He wasn't guilty. Not that he could remember, so he should try and walk proudly while he still could, and under his own powers. If he was going to go down, he was going to go down with dignity... if he could.

Together with the troopers, Piett entered into a lift at the far end of the hanger and they rode up into a large conference room. Like he expected, it was sterile and clean, and screamed order. It made him smile. He'd always liked order, cleanliness. That's partially why a military career appealed to him. He liked the chain of command, like how everything was neat and organized.

But they didn't stop here. No, the troopers led him out of the conference room and through the halls. They were all so clean, and even though Piett would have liked to have walked slower, to take in all he could, his escorts were driving him forward. Eventually, they made it to a different room, and here, the troopers stopped just outside the door. The door was open to reveal Lord Vader.

A shiver of dread filled the young man, and even though the Sith was sitting down, he was still terribly imposing and frightening. Piett watched in silence as the Supreme Commander was obviously finishing up some business with another trooper. Firmus tried not to listen, indeed, he couldn't really hear what they were saying, but he didn't want to be accused of

anything else. He already understood that whatever he said wouldn't matter. If the Sith Lord decided he was guilty, he was guilty. No if, and, or buts.

The trooper with Vader saluted, and the Sith handed him some sort of vial. Piett frowned in confusion. Even though it was none of his business, his curiosity was peeked, and he couldn't stop wondering what sort of business this trooper had that required... whatever Vader had given him. Maybe it was something for interrogation? Probably. There was probably a new political prisoner that needed Vader's special he tried to ignore what he'd just seen as it was none of his business.

When the trooper was dismissed, walking past the Cadet and his fellow brothers, Vader turned his attention now to the new arrivals. Even with the mask, Firmus could tell that the Sith's eyes were on him. It was terrifying.

Standing up, seeming to tower over everything, Vader looped his hands in his belt, staring at those just outside his door. "Cadet Piett," his booming voice filled the room.

Despite his instinct to either flee or faint, Firmus took a step into the room and snapped to attention. "Yes, Sir!"

Vader eyed him for a moment before looking at the troopers. "Leave us," he commanded.

And just like that, the doors closed and Firmus found himself alone with Darth Vader, for reasons unknown. A thrill of terror shot through him, but he did his best not to show it. He stayed at attention, hoping that he would just be killed quickly and nothing would be too drawn out. But, like anyone, he had heard all the rumors concerning Lord Vader and knew those chances were very slim.

"Sit," the Sith commanded, and Firmus had to fight himself not to run and stumble over himself to take his seat. Instead, he kept his salute for a moment longer before calmly—or rather, he hoped it looked calm—walked over to the table and sat only a chair length away from Lord Vader. The Sith slowly sank into his own seat as well.

Once seated, the Sith stared at him, his breathing the only sound. It seemed like any eternity before the Dark Lord finally spoke up. "Do you know why I have called you here?"

Firmus had to hide his trembling hands under the table, as he sat stiffly in his chair, keeping his back straight and his face as calm as he could manage to keep it. "I do not, Sir," he answered truthfully. Everyone knew Vader could read minds, it was useless to lie and excuses would only infuriate the dark creature more.

Unfortunately, he either must have said something thought provoking or stupid, because it took another long minute before the Sith spoke again. "I have called you here today because I require... special assistance."

Help? Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith, had called him, a lowly cadet, because he needed help? Relief spread through the young man instantly when he realized he was not in trouble. He wasn't going to die today! Or at least he wasn't if he didn't screw up. And so, after taking a deep breath, Piett nodded solemnly. "I will try to help you any way that I can, my lord."

"There is no try," the Supreme Commander snapped. "Either do or do not. I have no interest in anyone who will merely try."

Intimidated, the young man found himself nodded. "I will do anything I can to help you, Sir!" he corrected with military precision.

"Good," the Sith drawled before leaning back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. While still an intimidating sight, Piett couldn't help but notice that the other man looked almost... casual as he sat there. Although to associate the word 'casual' was almost as unfitting as using the word 'nice' with the creature. But still, now that he knew he wasn't in trouble for some unknown crime, Firmus found himself intrigued, almost relaxed in a strange way. Helping Darth Vader was not something many people could do, and he wondered what sort of service he could provide his Supreme Commander with.

"I have need of an assistant," Vader went on, startling Piett from his thought. 'Someone to see to certain details while I escort Senator Amidala to her homeworld of Naboo.' He paused a moment to let the information sink into the cadet's mind. "Are you willing to accept this position? Speak freely."

Speak freely in Vader talk really meant, I dare you to disagree, but Firmus knew that he had to speak up now or he'd lose the chance forever. So, timidly, even though his head screamed at him to stop, his gut told him to answer and remain honest. "Sir, you give me a great honor by selecting me for such a task," he began carefully, "but... but I was trained for being out in the field and am, besides, very young. I am uncertain I would serve you adequately, though I would endeavor to perform such a duty to the very best of my abilities."

"Such honesty is rare for one in your position," Vader said, and intrigued air in his voice. "Usually men in your position would grab such an opportunity instantly. You are either very stupid or very wise."

Piett found himself blushing, but fought not to shrink back. "I... Forgive me, Sir, but I believe that there is no merit in lying, especially to a commanding officer." At Vader's nod, he went on. "If I should take the position offered without thoroughly thinking through the situation, I could potentially be unfit without realizing it. If I were, I would not only let you down personally, but my ineptitude might very well jeopardize the entire mission, which would send shockwaves throughout the entire Empire. That is not something I could live with, Sir."

The Sith sat up, taking on a more formal posture yet again, and the cadet knew he was being scrutinized. "Your honesty is most unusual," Vader said quietly, or as quietly as his mask would allow. "Tell me, Cadet, do you find yourself inept?"

"No, Sir," Firmus responded instantly. 'Not in what I was trained to do. I am merely... cautious about agreeing to something outside of my training.' Vader was silent. "B-but if you have reviewed my records, Sir, and found me capable, I am sure I will learn and adjust, and will do all that I can to serve you in the Empire's name."

He was perhaps being a little too disgustingly patriotic, but Firmus couldn't help it. He really did love his Empire. Before the rise of the Emperor, life in his family hadn't been so great. Indeed, nothing around the galaxy seemed to be doing well. All around him there had been gross poverty, war, and disease. When Emperor Palpatine had ascended the throne, with Lord Vader by his side, the two Sith were able to extract quick and decisive action within the galaxy, and all for the better, as far as Firmus could see. People got fed, crime was all but

stopped, and the massive injustices in the galaxy seemed solved, or at least drastically reduced so that a normal being could live their life. He believed in the Empire, he loved it.

But as he sat facing the number two of the entire galaxy, he wondered if he should show his true colors like this. It made him vulnerable in a way. What Vader knew he could use against him. Piett understood this. While he believed the Empire was an ultimate good, he also understood that there were times when the large foundation had to show some force, had to have some act as the bad guys because all governments had to have someone like that, to make the unpopular, but necessary decisions, and Lord Vader was that someone.

Still... Piett hoped that his conversation with the Supreme Commander wouldn't have to take advantage of what Firmus said.

"Your loyalty to the Empire is admirable," the Sith acknowledged generously. "Yet I find it curious, you say you are loyal to the Empire and serve in its name rather than the name of the Emperor."

Any good feelings of being complimented or from the patriotism died within the young man's chest at the Sith Lord's words. Firmus was loyal to the Emperor, but he was also smart enough to understand that the Emperor was just a man... a powerful one, but a man nonetheless. And as a man, the Emperor was prone to the same faults as anyone else. Piett knew his history well and understood that such power could potentially corrupt any being. The Empire was an ultimate good, its leaders potentially weren't, and now that he came face to face with the heir, he was finding it hard to admit this little fact, this core belief he'd always held to himself.

Sweating, the young cadet thought over how to handle this situation. "I am loyal to the Emperor," he began, but then faltered. What else could he say? Could he admit that in certain circumstances he would oppose the man that had brought about the creation of the Empire? Piett wasn't sure he'd be able to. What if Lord Vader took it the wrong way? What if he was seen as a traitor when he really wasn't? Would the Sith Lord understand him if he proposed a hypothetical scenario?

But as time went by and still Firmus could think of nothing else to add, he realized he was had. He still firmly believed in not lying to his superiors, though he was tempted this time. How had he managed to get himself into this position anyway? Curse his blindness! If only he'd been able to think ahead, he could have made sure not to walk into such a trap. Though this was Lord Vader he was up against. Somehow Piett knew that he would never be able to outthink the Sith.

And so, with nothing else to say, he sat helplessly, staring into the masked face of the Sith Lord, who had strangely remained silent. After another few torturous moments, Vader sat back once more, nodding. "You are loyal, but understand circumstances that may require rebellion," he said Firmus's exact thoughts. Had he deduced this himself or had he read his mind? Either one was disturbing to the young man. "Your honesty is rare, Cadet."

Not knowing if that was a compliment or not, Piett nodded his head, opting to remain silent. What was going to happen to him now, he wondered? Was this an elaborate plot to flush out rebels or was this really Vader's way of selecting men? Firmus had heard that often times Lord Vader handpicked his officers, maybe this was just the Sith Lord's strange version of hazing?

"I have reviewed your files, Cadet, and have found you adequate for this assignment," Vader went on, as if forgetting all about their discussion of patriotism and loyalty. "I have already sent word of your transfer to the Vengeance and you will begin your duties tomorrow morning at seven hundred hours."

"Yes, Sir!"

"Effective immediately I am promoting you to the rank of Lieutenant Commander." Firmus's eyes bugged out a bit. "Your upcoming duties will include organizing security along with one of my Storm Troopers for Senator Amidala's safety. You will also be in charge of watching her and protecting her in my absence and arranging transportation. Should anything go wrong, and more force is required, you will be in control of organizing defenses and attacks.

"Overall, you will help to coordinate all the security and events surrounding the senator. You will answer to no one except to me, although I suggest you listen to my Storm Trooper commander. When en route to Naboo, you will inspect the ship and all escape pods, as well as watch the other officers. You will not have to comply to their commands save in the event of an emergency. You are under my command. Remember that. You will be sent more detailed instructions which I expect you to memorize."

"Yes, Sir!"

"I am relying on you for this assignment. Do not disappoint me, Commander."

Piett was shaking again. "Yes, Sir!"

"You are dismissed."

"Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir!"

And so, with that, Firmus stood, saluted, and walked out of the conference room and out of Lord Vader's presence, shaken, confused, and amazed. Had that really just happened? Had he not only been specifically selected by Lord Vader himself for a special assignment, but promoted well beyond his expectations at the same time? Really? And at eighteen-years-old, no less! He was already a high ranking officer in the Imperial Navy! He still couldn't believe it!

As the shock gave way to realization, the young man found himself smiling stupidly as he walked through the halls of the Naval Base. Him, a Lieutenant Commander. Who would have thought? His family was going to be so proud!

"Commander? Commander!"

Firmus was startled when another officer stepped in front of him, and only then realized that he had been addressed. "O-oh, excuse me, Sir," he immediately apologized, not at all used to his new rank.

The other man smiled at his stutter, being a good five or so years older than him, but also had an understanding gleam in his olive colored eyes. "It is not a problem, Sir," his smile widened at Piett's surprised expression at being shown such respect. 'I am Lieutenant Pilor, Lord Vader's personal assistant here one Coruscant,' he explained easily. "I'm to show you to your quarters while here on base and to see to it that you get fitted for your new uniform."

The young man's eyes must have betrayed his shock, and the Lieutenant smiled almost brotherly at him. "Right... carry on then," Piett said, hoping to sound authoritative, though he knew he failed.

As he followed the other man, the excitement of all that had happened wore off, and worry began to set in. He wanted to talk to the other officer, but at the same time, he was still in the mindset of a lowly Cadet, unworthy of speaking to a glorious Lieutenant. But if he was to serve Lord Vader adequately on this mission, he knew he would have to shake himself out of this mindset quickly. He was, after all, expected to inspect even higher ranking officers once en route to Naboo.

"Lieutenant," he began carefully, knowing that he was only just a step ahead of the other man. When Pilor turned his head and gave him his attention, Piett continued. "You obviously know that I have been promoted by Lord Vader."

"Yes, Sir," the Lieutenant nodded.

Being addressed with so much respect felt surreal. "You realize that I was just a cadet a few moments ago."

"Yes, Sir."

Firmus suddenly felt disgusting and sleazy. "I had always dreamed of working my way up the ranks and proving myself worthy of being an officer... now that I am suddenly a Lieutenant Commander, I can't help but feel that I've... cheated somehow. Do you think that I deserve this honor?"

The older man stopped walking and stared at his companion thoughtfully. "Permission to speak freely, Sir?" he asked with a kind smile.

Squirming at the formality and respect given to him, Firmus nodded. Would he ever get used to anyone speaking to him like this?

"This is how I see it, Commander," Pilor went on, thankfully ignoring the younger officer's discomfort. "Lord Vader is an excellent judge of character. He knows exactly who he's dealing with before he meets them. With just one look he knows who to trust and who not to. If you have managed to capture his attention and impress him enough for him to consider promoting you like this; you're obviously deserving, and he must see that you'll work hard to earn this quick promotion. Right?"

"Of course!" the younger man nodded quickly. He wanted so very badly to prove himself, to show that he was worthy of Lord Vader's special attentions, even after only seeing him twice before. This promotion was almost a shame now that he thought about it if he didn't work hard and live up to the expectations thrust upon him.

"Then, if I may, Sir, just work," the Lieutenant shrugged. "Prove that you're worthy of the title. Working for Lord Vader is not easy, I won't lie to you, but if you do what's required and you give it one hundred percent at all times— which ever officer should strive to do in the first place— you'll be just fine. Now, come on, Commander, let's get you ready for your first big assignment."

Smiling at the other man, Piett nodded before following him through the base. It was time for some hard thinking and even harder work, but Lieutenant Commander Firmus Piett was

determined to do his duty and prove that he was everything Lord Vader apparently saw in him.

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Sola frowned as she sat at her family home. While things were turning up in their favor, she still had an unsettling feeling about the celebration coming up. It was a relief to hear that Padmé was coming home, she wondered at the Sith that would be coming along with her.

Plans would have to be rearranged in order to get Padmé away from Vader, she knew. Originally, it'd been believed that her sister would be staying at the Theed Palace along with the Sith, but now the sneaky little senator had found a way to get away and stay with her family, but that wasn't exactly comforting. While it was great that her sister would soon be with them again, that meant that she was potentially bringing danger with her. Sola absolutely did not want Darth Vader anywhere near her children, or the rest of her family.

No, things were going to get tricky from here on out. It was still unclear as to who exactly would be coming with her sister, but there was a safe bet that the Dark Lord of the Sith would be stalking around close by. While Sola was willing to put herself at risk to help her little sister, she was not willing to jeopardize the rest of the family. This was all getting a little too close.

And then there were the Jedi to worry about. They had assured her at the beginning when it was believed that Padmé would be staying at the palace that they could hide themselves... or at least Master Yoda had. Obi-Wan, Sola noticed, had not looked as confident as his master. Master Yoda had said there was a way to block out the Force signature and mask it for a certain length of time, so that they could essentially hide from Vader. While she didn't want to sound negative, Sola didn't believe the little green master. Darth Vader was like a well-trained hunting animal. There was not a Jedi that got away from him once he'd set out to hunt them, and even Obi-Wan hadn't successfully evaded the Sith Lord. Whatever plan Master Yoda had, would not work...

But then, who was sure to disagree with the Jedi? Sola wasn't even the least bit Force sensitive and knew very little of the strange powers. All that she knew was that there were very few who could wield the great, mystical power, and the most powerful she'd seen, apparently, was in Darth Vader. That was not a particularly reassuring thought. And it only served to make her more worried about her sister, despite Bail saying that Padmé had some sort of power over the Sith.

What did that mean? This power? For months now there had been rumors surrounding her sister and her involvement with Vader. At the beginning it had been that she was a Rebel sympathizer or worse—which was true. But then it had changed to talk that Rebels were out to hurt her and the Emperor had assigned his Right Hand to protect the well beloved Senator of Naboo. But things didn't stop from there, oh no. No, next there were rumors, and pictures, of Padmé and the Sith Lord together, like some sort of bizarre couple.

Bail had told them that Padmé had been drunk that night, but as Sola looked at the pictures again on her padd, she couldn't help the uneasy feeling she got. Padmé was completely vulnerable looking in the images. While she was laughing and smiling, Vader was watching her closely. There were stories that the creature in black could read minds... Sola wasn't sure



if that was completely true or not, but from the pictures, she would not put it past the creature to have tried to read her mind then, when she was not able to protect herself or give struggle. Maybe Vader knew everything anyway. Maybe Lord Vader knew everything Padmé did...

Obi-Wan had raised an interesting thought the last time she'd seen him. When Bail had admitted to be getting spy information from her sister, the Knight had objected, and wondered if he had not been attacked by the Sith because Vader knew what information Padmé had gotten a hand on. It made sense, and went exactly with the stories of Vader. But then, Bail had had the utmost confidence in her sister, probably because Padmé had been so sure of herself. But just because Padmé was sure of herself and Bail believed her, didn't mean that Padmé was right or necessarily secure. Darth Vader didn't get into the position he was in just because he looked scary, Sola was sure.

"Ugh!" the oldest Naberrie daughter let her head thump down on the table by the computer terminal. "Padmé, why is it always you?" she muttered.

The name 'Naberrie' had somewhere along the lines become synonymous with 'stubborn' and while Sola believed she'd inherited a fair share of stubbornness, somehow Padmé seemed to have come up with ten times more. Which only became worse when the younger Naberrie sister went on one of her damned moralistic crusades. Sola believed herself to be a moral person, but Padmé... well, she was fifty times worse, never quitting until she oversaw personally that everything worked out for everyone's benefits. It was admirable, but then, the elder sister wish her sibling would take a break and think of herself every once and a while.

If only Padmé had had a man in her life, none of this would have happened... or at least not to this extent. If she'd had a man around for her after her terms as queen, Padmé would have likely settled down with him before this whole galactic mess had started up and the Empire was not even spoken of. Perhaps when Palpatine and Vader had come into play, the former queen would have started a family of her own, and not been so eager to put herself at risk for her family's sake. Yes, then Sola would have gotten to see her sister's infamous self-sacrificial ways come to a halt as she'd think about a husband or child.

Sighing, Sola knew that it was really no use thinking about the 'what ifs' still lingering about her mind. The facts were simple: Padmé was not married, nor did she have much holding her back, meaning the senator could happily put herself at risk as she believed that it was her duty, never once thinking of her parents or sister. Padmé was also an apparently high ranking member of the Rebel Alliance as well. And now, because of her sister's inopportune stubbornness, Sola was going to have to pick up the pieces. Sure Padmé wouldn't like it that she was getting involved, Sola felt it was her duty, not only as her sister, but as a citizen of the galaxy. It went against her morals to sit by when such an opportunity was placed into her lap.

So, getting up from the terminal, Sola decided that she had to come up with a few plans of her own to help her sister. Because one way or another, Padmé was not going to stay under the care of some evil Sith Lord. Sola would see to that personally.

## 27. Welcome Home

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When the end of the week had come, Padmé couldn't help the excitement that nearly overwhelmed her. Naboo. Home. The word never sounded so good to her before in her life! Not even when the Trade Federation had attacked had she felt so elated in going back home. It had been over half a year since she'd last seen the green meadows, the rushing waterfalls of her home. And now she was going back. Now she would get to see her family and friends!

The only problem was the Sith Lord that was going with her. Since their beautiful night together, Vader hadn't come to her at all. It hurt, but at the same time, Padmé was realistic enough to understand that he was busy or perhaps didn't understand what they'd shared. Planning this excursion was definitely a time consuming endeavor. And as a result, the Sith seemed to have been in a very foul mood lately. He snapped more, practically grumbled, and besides all that, he actually yelled at a lot of people, even when she was around. Gone was the playful banter that they sometimes engaged in, and back was the Supreme Commander of the Imperial Navy.

The loss of familiarity between them would have been more bearable had she still had Cory, but even the Storm Trooper wasn't doing well lately. He wasn't angry, like Vader was, but he was distant, and quiet. One afternoon when she'd gone out for lunch, she'd realized that Cory had been replaced with a different trooper. When she'd asked about it, the replacement told her nothing and snapped at her to get to the cafeteria. She never did find out what was wrong, or where he had gone.

But she refused to be saddened so completely. She was on her way home, after all, and there was plenty to be glad about. And despite losing Vader and Cory to their mysterious moods, she'd gained a new ally of sorts.

Smirking, the senator couldn't help the fondness she felt when she thought of the very young Lieutenant Commander Piett. It was strange to see one so young as a high ranking officer. Word about the ship was that Vader promoted Piett personally before they left Coruscant. No one really knew why. Rumor had it that Piett was just a Cadet before, and now suddenly he was Lieutenant Commander. Vader had taken a special interest in him, and as such, Padmé couldn't help but take one as well.

From what she'd seen of him, Piett was a nice sort of boy, very polite and proper. She could see traits within him that even Vader could appreciate in his realistic, dutiful manner. But even with all of the good qualities she saw in the boy, she couldn't help but wonder why Vader had promoted him. He was too young to have done anything noteworthy in the military or she would have heard about it. He didn't come for a prestigious military family that she knew of. Whatever the reason for his sudden success, Padmé was glad for him, and wished him the best, because working under Lord Vader was not a simple task.

But she was glad for Piett's company all the same. In fact, he was the only one that saw her for more than a few moments now that they were en route to Naboo. Vader would stop by every morning and night to look at her before he turned and left sometimes without a word, Cory was running about, having gotten a bit of a promotion himself, having Troopers to

oversee, and Arlo was still back on Coruscant, holding down the fort, as it were, in Vader's absence. Right now, it really was just her and Piett, the endearing, yet nervous young man.

Sitting in front of the mirror in her room, brushing out her hair, Padmé sighed. This trip meant a great deal to her, yet it seemed no one else thought much of it. That bothered her. Naboo was such a wonderful, beautiful place, how could anyone not be excited to see it? She wanted to share her home world, share the beauty with everyone! With Vader.

Sighing, she looked out the window at the stars streaking by. It had been several days since leaving Coruscant, and they were getting closer and closer to home. All manner of thoughts ran through her mind and she couldn't help but wonder what would happen once they landed. Sure, there was the festival and all, but that didn't mean that everything would go according to plan. Having such a large, famous party landing all at once would be tricky. Hopefully the fear of Lord Vader would at least give pause to anyone foolish enough to attempt to cause any sort of chaos in the Sith Lord's general vicinity.

There was a chime at the door, and even though she tried to tell herself that it was someone else, she couldn't squash the hope that it was Vader. She found herself almost desperate to see him again. So, hopping up more quickly than she probably should have, Padmé was at the door in a matter of moments. Opening it, she put on a bright smile, but instead of seeing it reflected back from a black helmet, she was met with the anxious expression of a nervous looking Commander Piett.

While glad for company, she tried to remain truly thankful that he'd come instead of feeling disappointed about it not being the Man in Black himself. "Good evening, Commander," she smiled warmly. "Please, come in."

The Imperial Officer nodded once, before stepping in, still uncertain, despite having been in her room several times over the past several days now. "I was just here to see if you were all right, Senator."

"Perfectly," she nodded. "And how are you this evening?"

The young man smiled back, more genuinely. He always seemed amazed at being treated so kindly from someone of such fame. "I'm doing well enough, thank you for asking, Senator. I was going to inform you that we'll be arriving at Naboo tomorrow o'nine hundred hours, local Theed time."

Hearing the name of her home caused Padmé to smile warmly, almost sighing in contentment. "Wonderful!" she beamed. "Thank you. I'm so glad to be going home."

Piett smiled a little wider. "I can imagine. It's been some time, has it not?"

"Indeed." She paused. "And what of you? What planet do you call home, Commander? If you don't mind my asking."

The officer suddenly became tense again and almost sheepish, as he responded, "O-oh. No, it's all right. I'm actually from, um... Axxila." He scratched the back of his neck.

"Axxila?"

Even though she knew she probably should have had more tact, Padmé couldn't help show her surprise. Axxila was not necessarily the sort of place where she could image such a

polite young man like Piett coming from. Piett had more of a farm boy personality, or at least, the senator had thought he had. But to learn that he'd come from a planet many considered harsher than Coruscant... well, it was surprising. What sort of life had this young man had? How had he been so sheltered from the cruelty? Or was he really just trying to change? Maybe he wasn't so naïve as she'd thought, maybe that's what Vader had seen in him...?

The young man nodded, looking decidedly uncomfortable, and wouldn't make eye contact. "Yes, well, it's not as bad as people say it is... It's not really run by criminals. It's happily been part of the Empire since the beginning."

"Of course!" Padmé nodded readily. "Forgive me, I just meant I haven't meant anyone from Axxila that hasn't been in some way too politically involved."

The commander nodded, easily understanding. "Yes, well... Ahem... Maybe I should... I mean, it's getting rather late and I wouldn't want anyone to think I'm shirking duty right now."

Almost laughing, the senator nodded. "Of course. Good night, Commander. Sleep well."

"Yes! Yes, you as well, Senator. Good night," he said as he left, and all but tripped out through the door.

As it closed, Padmé let out a small chuckle, shaking her head. Lieutenant Commander Piett was such a mystery. She'd seen him interact with older, higher ranking officers and his behavior was nothing but professional and calm. She'd even seen him with Vader and he acted like nothing but the typical loyal commander, faithfully by his superior's side, waiting for orders. So how was it that when ever faced with the Senator from Naboo he was a nervous, sweating wreck? I didn't think I was that intimidating, she thought in amusement. After all, what was she to Lord Vader?

Apparently she had a scariness all her own as well. Which was interesting. Maybe she and Lord Vader were destined to be some sort of Imperial power couple. She instantly snorted at the idea. Me? An Imperial? Not a chance.

But as she climbed into bed, she couldn't help smiling as she thought about tomorrow, about how she would finally be home, and how she would see her family. Mingled into those thoughts, however, as her eyes became heavier and heavier with sleep, were vague images, sensations from her last beautiful evening with Vader. Within moments, she was drifted off into peaceful sleep. She didn't even hear the door to her room being opened, or the sound of a respirator beside her as a leather glove ever so lightly brushed her cheek.

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Naboo. World of a thousand waterfalls! She was home!

It took everything within Padmé to keep a regal, steady pace as they exited the shuttle in the hanger at the Theed Palace and to not just run out screaming in joy like an excited little child. Home! Looking back at Lord Vader, who was staying very close beside her, Padmé threw him a bright smile, wondering what he'd do if she just took off running like some deranged maniac.

"You don't want to know."

Startled, Padmé actually jumped at hearing a voice inside her head, and as she gawked up at Vader, the Sith remained completely composed, and pushed her to keep her walking. Had she not been so shocked at having someone speak into her mind, she might have smiled at how gently he had treated her, or how his large hand continued to hover just at her back, not touching, but at the ready in case something should happen.

It took the senator a moment to remember that he could hear her thoughts when she was particularly emotional. He'd made her aware that he could the first full day she'd been entrusted into his care, but he hadn't brought it up since. Vaguely she wondered when else he'd had to listen to her thoughts without her knowing it. Had he heard her thoughts when they were intimate together? Padmé wasn't sure if she wanted him to hear those, and wasn't sure if she should be smirking at him naughtily or blushing.

But such thoughts had to be left for another time, as the queen's entourage came striding into the hanger, and along with them, her family. Seeing such familiar faces was enough to make the senator's eyes tear up, and once more she was almost overwhelmed with the desire to fling herself into their arms and just sob. It had been too long. Far too long.

Beside her, she could tell Vader was tense, and he seemed to get a little bit closer, probably hearing her thoughts. But she wouldn't really make a fool of herself like that. She knew how to behave and knew she had to keep up appearances. So, at the pace the Sith set, the two parties met each other in the middle, the queen in the front of the Naboo troop and Vader and Padmé in front of the Imperials.

"Lord Vader," Queen Jamilia bowed. "We are honored by your presence."

"You highness," the Sith nodded.

"My queen," Padmé bowed.

"Senator," the royal nodded. "It is good that you have come home."

"Thank you, your highness," she responded with a small, but warm smile. "I am very pleased to have been able to make it back for the celebration."

The queen nodded. "Your things will be taken to your rooms within the palace as we first discuss certain matters in the Throne Room."

The senator nodded, becoming all business. "Of course, your highness. Only, I'll be staying with my family for the duration of my stay here on Naboo."

Vader's head snapped over to stare down at her so fast, it was a wonder his helmet didn't fly off. The others noticed this as well, but Padmé kept her poise. "You are staying here in the palace," the Sith replied with a surprising amount of patience.

Turning to look at the Sith through the helmet, the little woman shook her head. "I told you that I would be staying with my family."

Slowly, his hands balled up into fists and the Imperials, knowing the signs more clearly than average citizens, all stiffened, some even backing away. "You're staying here," he said sharply. There was a great strain in his voice, as though he were trying his very hardest to keep his temper in check and not fly into a rage where he sliced her in half, but such patience was slipping rapidly.

“Perhaps you can both discuss this after our meeting,” the queen spoke up diplomatically. It was a rather nerve wracking situation, as no one had ever witnessed anyone back-talk or contradict Lord Vader and live. Behind the royal entourage, the Naberrie family looked close to faint while the handmaidens and other politicians looked decidedly paler.

“Very well,” Padmé replied easily, keeping her small smile in place. “Shall we?”

A part of her knew that she’d be catching hell for this later on, but the other part of her really just didn’t care. She was so close to seeing and spending time with her family, and being able to feel completely happy for the first time in a long time, she wasn’t about to let a Sith Lord stand in her way. And if her theory of having power over Vader was true, she knew she wouldn’t be harmed. Not anymore. She meant too much to him now.

And so, while everyone else was tense and on edge as they felt the hostility in the air that surrounded Vader, Padmé walked on gracefully, at peace as she saw the familiar sights, smelled the fresh, familiar air again. No, not even the Emperor’s Shadow could terrify her here. She was in her element on Naboo, and she would use it to her fullest advantage.

As they came into the Throne Room, everyone took their places, the Naberrie family obliged to be escorted to a waiting area, while the politicians—and Vader—discussed a few certain elements of the celebration. Of course a lot of the points had to be perhaps changed since most was security details for Padmé at the palace. Already she saw Piett and Cory talking to one another in hushed voices in the corner of the room, looking at a layout of the palace and of the town where her parents’ lived. Piett seemed extremely agitated while Cory’s motions betrayed his frustrations. She felt bad for putting them in a spot like this, but at the same time, she refused to back down. Her family deserved to see her!

And so, once the meeting was brought to a close, Vader wasted no time at all, before he grabbed the senator by the arm, and dragged her away. It was humiliating to be dragged about like a rag doll, and Padmé caught sight of her family’s horrified faces as they watched the Sith drag their daughter away, but she merely smiled in exasperation at them, and knew from experience that it was better just to let Vader win in this. After all, it was good to appease him in the small things so that he’d be more willing to listen and look at the bigger picture.

When they came to a stop not terribly far away from the Throne Room or the waiting area her family was still standing in, the great creature turned towards her, and Padmé could almost feel his eyes burning into her. She knew she was in for the lecture of her life, but she would not back down. Not here. And so, focusing her mind, she turned her full attention to the Sith and prepared herself for the argument at hand.

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Sola wasn’t sure she’d even felt quite so ill in her life. Sure, her pregnancies hadn’t been a walk in the park, but to see her younger sister being dragged around by the infamous Lord Vader like she was nothing but a blanket was enough to turn even the hardest stomachs. The pessimistic side of her told Sola to expect to watch her sister get murdered before her eyes. But that’s not what happened.

The family watched in stunned horror as the Sith stopped about twenty-five or so meters away before he released Padmé. The moment he did, he leaned in, probably hissing

something at the senator, his hands clenched tightly into fists. Unbelievably, Padmé just crossed her arms boldly as she listened.

After several minutes of what Sola assumed was filled with Vader scolding her, her sister made a reply. Of course whatever she said seemed to only anger the monster more, and suddenly with a sharp gesture that made her mother gasp, Vader started stabbing his finger in Padmé's direction, and it soon became wagging rather than stabbing. Strangely, it reminded Sola too much of a parent scolding an errant child. Though perhaps that wasn't too far off since Padmé had always remained childishly stubborn...

The exchange went on like that for several long tense minutes, and as it did, Sola was actually surprised at how quiet they were being. Obviously Vader was furious about being not only contradicted, but more than likely told what to do knowing her sister, and Padmé was stupid enough not to back down.

But actually, Sola was rather confused with the whole thing, and knew that the rebels were going to have to change their plans on rescuing her sister. Vader was too close to her, as he seemed to almost hover just over the senator. And even though she didn't know much about the Force or its users, the architect did know that Vader had the ability to know when Jedi were in the area. She was just glad that Bail had urged the two Jedi Masters to leave the planet when they had. Though she wondered what would happen or if they could even be successful in rescuing Padmé. Darth Vader was a lot bigger in real life, and she hoped that the three men she'd found herself thrown in with knew what they were doing.

And just as suddenly as the argument had started, it ended, with Vader stalking back towards the Throne Room, Padmé forced to chase after him, a frustrated, perturbed look on her face. The Nabberrie family cleared the way for the creature in black, and just when he'd reached the door to enter the Throne Room again, he suddenly turned back around in such a sharp gesture that made the poor Nabberries gasp in surprise. Not noticing, or caring, the Sith pointed another finger at his charge and growled, "Stay."

With that, he turned back around and went straight towards an officer and trooper who were huddled in a corner, seeming to review something. By the time that the fear melted away somewhat, Sola turned back around to see her sister standing next to her with an annoyed expression as she frowned after the Sith. Seeing her like that, obviously not as distressed as everyone else and unharmed, Sola threw her arms around her little sister, crushing her.

"You stupid, stupid girl!" he muttered into the thick hair, almost breaking into tears when she felt her sister hugging her back.

"I never learn," Padmé agreed with a laugh.

As soon as Sola let go, their mother and father were crushing their youngest in hugs and showering her with kisses. Jobal was crying by now, going on and on about how thin Padmé looked and asking if she'd been treated well. Her sister was a fabulous actress, but for once, Sola believed Padmé when she said she was okay. She looked a little different, perhaps lost a little weight, but she looked quite healthy and very bright, a smile never dropping from her lips. It was obvious that the younger Nabberrie had missed her home very much during her long imprisonment.

“Padmé,” Ruwee began once the excitement calmed a little. “We don’t want you to get into any trouble or cause any. Why don’t you just stay at the palace? They obviously thought —”

“No,” Padmé shook her head stubbornly. “I’m staying with you. Lord Vader said I could. He’s just got to make a few changes to his security details, that’s all.”

Shaking her head incredulously, Sola crossed her arms. “You’re very stupid, Padmé,” she sighed, not completely able to keep the fondness from her voice. “I think you’ve got to be the first person to win an argument with Lord Vader.”

The younger woman smirked with far too much self-satisfaction. “You’ve just got to know how to handle him.”

Raising her eyebrow, the older sister frowned. “And you do?”

“You pick up a few things when you see him everyday,” she replied nonchalant with a slight raise of her shoulder.

So, for several minutes the family had a small reunion, filling in the youngest member in about the goings on at home before a definite chill fell over them, and the horrible sound of hissing filled the air. Sola shivered and turned to see the Sith returning with the officer and trooper he’d been speaking to in tow. Stopping before the family, Vader seemed to ignore the others as he stared solely on his charge.

“Commander Piett will be joining you, as well as CT-585,” he explained bluntly. ‘If there are any problems, you will alert them immediately, and under no circumstances are you to make your location known to anyone. You will be traveling in a covered, civilian speeder.’ Turning towards the trooper and officer, the Sith continued, “You have your orders. Fail in any of them and I will have you both executed. Personally.”

Sola had to keep her jaw from dropping, but while the officer seemed a little pale, his expression didn’t change from neutral obedience, while she could detect no change in the trooper at all. In unison, they both replied with a, “Yes, my lord” while the officer added, “It will be done, my lord,” for good measure.

“Step out of line, and there will be consequences,” Vader turned back to Padmé hissing menacingly, but again, surprisingly, the senator seemed unimpressed.

“Of course.”

And at last, the dark creature left, apparently deciding he needed to scare and intimate other people. And so, the Nabberrie family was left to stand awkwardly with an Imperial Officer and a Storm Trooper. The trooper did nothing but stand at attention, while the officer turned to stare at the others, before he nodded his head in greeting. “Lieutenant Commander Piett,” he introduced. “I’ve been assigned to stay with you for the protection of Senator Amidala.”

Their father raised an eyebrow, a little less than impressed, and Sola, too, was taken aback by how young the officer looked. He was a baby! Far too young to have such a rank or to even be in the navy at all! What were his parents thinking to let such a young thing go off like that, and to be under the command of Vader?



But Jobal was nothing if not a peacekeeper, and her motherly instincts seemed to override the fright she'd received from the Sith as she stepped forward with a smile. "It's nice to meet you, Lieutenant Commander. I'm Jobal Naberrie, and this is my husband, Ruwee, and our eldest daughter, Sola."

"A pleasure," Piett nodded.

"And this is Cory," Padmé stepped forward introducing the trooper who had opted to remain silent. "He's the trooper that's been looking after me at work. He's a good friend. They both are."

Finally the trooper appeared to be come alive as he turned his helmet towards her sister, probably just as surprised as the rest of them at Padmé's words. But of course, their mother only nodded after a moment, still smiling, though it looked a bit stressed, but it was a smile all the same. "Nice to meet you, Cory. You are both certainly welcome in our home. Any friends of our Padmé are always welcome."

The officer blinked in astonish, apparently not expecting the warm invitation, just as Sola and her father stared at Jobal in surprise. But of course they better than to disagree with the matriarch of the family. Because despite her warmth and mildness, if provoked, Jobal Naberrie could be utterly terrifying.

In the meantime, Padmé was just beaming, giving her mother an affectionate look. "Well, shall we go? I'm starving."

Shaking her head in utter amazement, Sola rolled her eyes. "Only you, Padmé. Only you."

"Well, let's go then," Ruwee sighed. "We'll have to see what sort of speeder we can get, first, I suppose."

It wasn't too hard to get a speeder, since apparently Lord Vader had been there before them, threatening the poor technicians and the people who were in charge of maintaining the royal speeders. They were almost immediately directed towards one that the Sith had picked out, and it was unnerving for Sola to have to climb in and sit rather too closely to an Imperial Officer. While Piett looked harmless enough, she wouldn't be surprised if he'd already done some truly horrendous things in his career.

The ride back was filled mostly with Padmé and Jobal's chatter, while Ruwee drove, and Sola was left to sit silent next to the officer and the Storm Trooper. The latter two didn't speak either. But it wasn't from lack of interest that Sola refrained from speaking or awkwardness, because she was very interested in what Padmé had to say, but she couldn't help the sick feeling that came over her at the thought that there would be these two Imperials in the house where her own children would be staying. She hadn't wanted such men anywhere near her girls, but it seemed that she was going to have to watch out more carefully, as well as make sure not to send any communications from her parents' house to Bail.

Things were going to get a lot harder.

When they came to a stop outside their home, Padmé rushed out, smiling and turning her face to the sky. Seeing the utterly content, peaceful expression on her sister's face, Sola couldn't help but smile too. While her sister was a never ending source of frustration, she was

also a source of great joy in all of their lives. It was good to see her home, even if it meant that there would be two unwanted men here too.

“So good being home,” Padmé muttered almost to herself. “So what’s for dinner?”

Smirking, Sola crossed her arms. “Well, Darred’s been cooking all morning while we came to get you.”

“Darred cooked?” Padmé exclaimed in excitement. “Excellent!”

Their parents laughed, smiling fondly. While everyone in the Naberrie family were exceptional at cooking, it was rare for Darred to cook, and thus a special treat. He’d actually come from a long line of chefs and was actually wonderful at it himself, though he spent much of his energy on work. The first time Padmé had ever had Darred’s cooking, she’d complained the entire time leading up to the dinner, whining. “How can an architect cook?” she’d asked in horror. But funnily enough, when she took the first bite, having winced and making a grand show of her distaste the entire time, the moment the food had hit her tongue, the young politician had rapidly fallen in love.

Smiling, Sola shook her head again out of the fond memories. Yes, it was good to have her sister home, but she was going to have to watch out for the Imperials as they took their stay here. Unfortunately, what little rest she’d been counting on while with her family would be all but nonexistent now. It would be tough to keep her girls away from the strangers, as they were both happy, curious children, but somehow she was going to have to think of a way. Granted, Piett didn’t seem so bad, but she knew better than to judge based on appearances. The trooper, however, was fair game since he was bred to kill.

The group finally made it into the house, Padmé having to get inside quickly, lest rousing suspicion, as well as the officer and the trooper. Once those three were safely inside, Ruwee and Sola picked up Padmé’s bags and carried them in while Jobal was explaining things to a very confused Darred, who was forced to hold onto two very excited girls, as to why there were Imperials in the house. Padmé, however, didn’t even seem to care anymore, as she scooped her nieces up into big hugs.

“Oh, I missed you both!” she cried, kissing them both over and over again. Sola would have smiled brighter, but she couldn’t help the worry that wouldn’t leave her. She caught eyes with Darred, and he seemed to instantly understand as he smiled back comfortingly.

“Well, dinner will be ready in about half an hour,” her husband declared. “Why don’t you all get settled in before we talk each others’ ears off? Girls, you want to help me with the dessert?”

“YEAH!” two little voices cried as they ran back into the kitchen, their curiosity over the strangers and their newly returned aunt were momentarily forgotten with the silent promise of being able to lick the spoon. Sola had gotten lucky for the time being, but she knew it’d be hell to try and keep the two away from everyone forever.

“Let me help you, Padmé,” Sola offered as she grabbed some of her sister’s bags, as Padmé was already heading up to her room.

Jobal, turned to the other two men and smiled brightly at them, insisting that she show them to their room. “You’ll have to share, I’m afraid, as we’re currently a full house.”

The trooper didn't react, but Piett seemed a little flustered at the kindness. He nodded stiffly, and so the newly arrived party all went up the stairs in a big noisy herd. Ruwee went along, wanting to keep an eye on his wife as she went with the two Imperials, while Padmé laughed and told her two 'friends' about the house and which rooms were which, even as Jobal was doing the exact same thing.

At last, when the two sisters were alone, setting down bags, Sola turned to her sister and hugged her again. She was so afraid, so confused, but she held on to her baby sister tightly. "Padmé," she sighed tiredly. "Do you know what you've gotten yourself into?"

Padmé held on to her just as tightly, and Sola felt the younger woman almost tremble in her embrace. "I hope so, Sola. I really hope so..."

## 28. Calm Before the Storm

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That night, as Padmé got ready for bed, she couldn't keep the smile off her lips. It had been a rather amusing day for everyone involved. While she knew that Sola had not liked the idea of Cory and Firmus staying here— at all!— even she couldn't have failed to see the hilarity over the course of the day.

Lunch had been absurdly delicious, as all of Darred's cooking usually was, but what had made the meal even better was her mother's insistence— that bored on harassment— that Cory sit down and eat with them. The trooper had refused, and while Piett had tried to explain their orders as carefully as he could without upsetting his hostess, Jobal had flat out refused 'no' for an answer. She'd been so insistent and threw such a fierce look at the helpless Imperials that, somehow, the trooper had eventually caved and did as 'invited.' When Padmé had teased the trooper about it later, Cory made all sorts of horrible excuses for bending to Jobal's will, denying that he had been intimidated by the woman. Apparently there was just something about Naberrie women that scared even Imperial Storm Troopers into submission. Even Sola had smirked a rather mean little smirk when Cory finally sat down, taking off his helmet to eat with them. It had been a sight that no one had thought they'd ever see.

Watching her mother with Firmus later, too, had been absolutely hysterical. During lunch, the young officer had gotten away from a lot of the attention since everyone was so focused on Cory at the time, but the Naberries hadn't forgotten about the other Imp. When dinner rolled around, Jobal, having satisfied her curiosity about Cory, turned her undivided attention towards Firmus. Of course that led to another round of interrogation. Like Cory, Jobal all but demanded to know everything she could about the officer: Where he was from, what his parents' names were, where he was born, what school had he gone to, and even asking about his rank. Poor Piett had been sweating the entire time, working hard to keep his expression polite and keep his wincing hidden whenever her mother had gotten a little too personal. He'd looked so uncomfortable, that for a moment, Padmé had thought he'd just slip into giving his name, rank, and serial number and refuse to answer any more questions, as per the Imperial code for captured officers.

Of course Cory had egged it on, apparently loving to witness such torture when he wasn't the focus of it. It was actually pretty nice to see Cory so much like... well, himself again. The past several days he'd been rather distant and quiet, slipping away to do secret tasks that he wouldn't even tell Padmé about. And when he'd taken his helmet off that afternoon, she'd been surprised at how pale and rather poorly he appeared. Despite having laughed and teased him, Padmé had been concerned for him. She'd never stopped to think that he could possibly be sick. She'd never thought Storm Troopers could get sick considering how genetically advanced they were in many areas.

But that night he had seemed like his old self. In the end, somehow, despite knowing how much Sola had been fighting against it, Sola and Cory ended up teaming up on several evil little comments in order to make poor Firmus suffer more by giving Jobal more fodder to fuel her interrogation. Of course her mother hadn't seen what her eldest daughter and the trooper were setting her up to torture Piett more, and went along with the game beautifully. Yes, even

when obviously ill, Cory's warped sense of humor still remained perfectly intact. It was always something strange, however, that seemed to trigger it, bringing out his rather unique personality.

And even though Firmus had been embarrassed and harassed the entire course of the evening, Padmé knew he'd had fun too. She'd actually caught him smiling a few times. The boy was so uptight and rightfully consciences of all his doings, but it was high time that he start having a little more fun and relax. Working for Vader could not always afford such luxuries, but Padmé hoped that she could help her friend out for the time being. Who knew when his next home cooked meal would be? Or when he'd be able to laugh?

The girls, too, had provided a wonderful source of entertainment for the evening. Their innocent questions and stories about their friends and school mixed with the general commotion of the group proved to be quite entertaining indeed. Children were always a laugh, but her little niece especially seemed particularly comical tonight. Maybe they'd just known the adults needed to laugh. It had soothed Sola, certainly, and even though Piett had appeared nervous in front of them, by the end of the evening, he was grinning from ear to ear at them. Pooja had even crawled into his lap, much to Sola's shock and Firmus's discomfort.

But now that she was alone with only memories of the pleasant day, Padmé found herself feeling unwell. She'd been so excited to come, and now that everything had quieted and all appeared well, she felt strange. She always did this to herself, always worked herself up and when things started to settle down and she had time to reflect, she just never felt up to speed. It had nothing to do with the fact that she found herself missing Vader. No. Not at all.

As she lie in bed, counting shaak, there was the sound of creaking just outside her door. Sitting up, frowning, Padmé turned to the clock. It was well past the time when everyone should be up. Indeed, they had all said their goodnights hours ago. Was something going on? Unable to stand the curiosity, she got up out of bed and tiptoed close to the door, hoping to get an idea as to who was sneaking about outside, hoping that it was nothing serious.

As she pressed her ear to the door, she was just in time to hear a disgruntled "—care of this." That was Cory's voice.

"I know you can, but you still need some rest," Firmus was arguing back almost completely silent.

On the other side of the door, Padmé frowned. She'd never heard these two sound so... harsh before.

"This is only temporary and it's not causing me any trouble! I don't need to be codd—"

"Showing concern is not coddling, Trooper, and never expect any from me," the commander snapped. "Now, I'm ordering you to take some rest. I'll wake you for the next shift."

There was a long pause. "You don't know nothin' about this, Commander," Cory growled. "When I tell Lord Vader about—"

"I know everything."

There was another silence. Piett sounded angry, and rightfully so, but it still surprised Padmé. She just couldn't believe how threatening they were being, even though, logically, she

knew they could. To survive in the Imperial Navy or Army, one had to understand how to take and give such threats.

After another beat, the trooper spoke up. "Lord Vader... told you about this?"

"Of course he did. Apparently I'm his... confidant, of sorts. He's brought me up to speed on a lot of his... projects when en route to Naboo."

"Then he must've told you that this won't keep me from my own duties."

"Taking rest is not interfering with anything," Piett sighed. 'He ordered both of us to watch Senator Amidala, and despite what you think, you're still human too, and as such, need rest. Now,' he went on before the clone could argue. "I'll take the first shift. You go rest. There's only room for one of us to sleep in there anyway," he added, sounding rather impish. "Unless you'd wanted to snuggle?"

Even through the door, Padmé could hear Cory's growl. "Fine. I'll rest. But you get me up when it's my turn or if there's issues of any sort."

"Of course."

"And... well..." the trooper trailed off. "What all did Lord Vader tell you on the way here?"

The entire house seemed to still, and Padmé found she was pressing against the door until there was no space between them, wanting so badly to know some of the great secrets Vader kept to himself. She wasn't even thinking of the Rebel Alliance at the moment, and had not for quite some time. All she could think about was perhaps getting to know the man that she'd come to love a little bit better. There was hope within her that should she collect enough data, she might be able to help Vader turn away from his evil and start showing the tender man she knew he could be. Even if the greater part of her knew it was a fool's errand.

"I'm afraid that's classified information," Piett responded automatically.

Cory didn't seem interested in the militaristic cliché. "Did he tell you about Black Hand?"

A pause. "Yes."

"Humph," she could hear the light sound of armor being put together. "Then... we really are in this together, aren't we? For better or worse?"

"As I said," Firmus replied haughtily. "And it is only because of that that I'm not going to inform Lord Vader of your gross lack of respect towards an officer."

Despite the hard words, Cory laughed quietly, just loud enough so that Padmé could hear it through the door. "Trying to be a hardass, kid? Ha! You're all right... Sir."

"Shut up and go to sleep," Firmus sounded anything but amused, even as Padmé couldn't keep the smile off her face.

"Sir, yes, Sir!" Cory replied obediently, and it was said with such professionalism that it was anyone's guess as to if he was trying to be sarcastic or not.

The soft sound of boot fall told the senator that the conversation was over, as one set went towards the spare room and the other down the stairs. With the conversation finished, it only

left the confused Padmé standing beside her door, her mind buzzing. What had that all been about. She was obviously missing several very key points and she just couldn't quite make sense of all that she'd heard.

Had Cory's apparent illness been... planned? Or it was at least well known to Lord Vader. While all sorts of terrible ideas popped into her head as to what it could be, Padmé supposed she should be grateful that it apparently wasn't anything too serious. If it were, Vader would have never allowed the trooper to come on the mission, let alone to guard her. Vader only kept those that were in peak condition to carry out special tasks, and anything else was less than sufficient and would not do. So despite Piett's worrying, whatever was wrong with Cory couldn't be too bad... Could it?

But the mysterious illness aside, what the hell were the two talking about afterwards? What was Firmus' rather cryptic, 'I know everything' supposed to mean? While they were talking about the sickness, they were obviously talking about something else as well. What was it? What sort of secret plans was Vader entrusting to his new assistant and faithful trooper? What was 'Black Hand' and why did it give her such a bad feeling?

The moon light flittered in through the window, but Padmé couldn't be bothered with its beauty. Her mind was thrumming, turning all the gears in her head as she pondered over what she'd just heard. While Cory's illness was a cause for worry, at the moment, it took a back seat to 'Black Hand.' It sounded like some sort of code, but a code for what was anyone's guess. Vader was planning something and when Vader planned something people usually died. What sort of secrets had he and the Emperor concocted this time? And why were her friends going along with it?

Because that's their job. They work for the Empire. For Vader. For the Emperor! her mind screamed at her. Have you really forgotten who they are? What Vader is? What all he's done?

"No," she whispered, allowing a tear to fall. She hadn't forgotten. How could she? Vader's sins were written in the heavens now, carved into history so solidly, there was nothing that could ever wash them away. The Emperor had called the creature his slave, and truly in many ways, Vader was just a slave to Palpatine. When the Emperor commanded go, Vader went. When the Emperor cried, 'no mercy!', Vader showed none.

The mess that the galaxy was in at that very moment was because of Vader. Palpatine might have planned it all, but Vader implemented all the orders. There would be no Empire without Vader. The creature in black was in the background, Padmé was sure, causing the chaos while Palpatine stayed within the foreground making sure all the pieces were falling into place. It had been a horribly efficient team effort, one that any general would have to be proud of, and it had worked. Brilliantly. Within such a short time, an Empire had grown and taken precedence over the former Republic, after nearly one thousand years of existence. In less than a decade, there was suddenly an Empire.

How could anyone forget the creature that helped forge the Empire? How could anyone forget about all that he'd done? All the murder, the chaos, the destruction? The name of Darth Vader was feared throughout the galaxy, and for very good reason.

Whatever was going to happen, whatever Firmus and Cory were talking about, it wasn't going to be good. Whatever 'Black Hand' was it was definitely something that Padmé was

not going to like. Anything planned by Vader was sure to be the harbinger of death and calamity.

The sick feeling of released tension was exacerbated now with the knowledge that there was possibly something horrible going to happen. Sitting down on her bed, the moonlight streaming over her troubled features, Padmé knew she wouldn't get anymore sleep tonight. Once more, she would be kept up because of her conflicting views of the man she had the misfortune of falling in love with.

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At that moment, Darth Vader was standing beside his window in the palace, looking up at the moon in silent contemplation. Or nearly silent, as his respirator hissed in the virtually still night. Unlike Coruscant, a Naboo night was still, all but silent, only the distant sound of a waterfalls and the gently symphony of insects. It was so very different than a night on Coruscant. Vader wasn't sure if he was comfortable here.

Naboo was a lovely planet, beautiful, but he wasn't sure if this planet was made to accommodate someone such as himself. He was a coarse man from a terribly coarse planet. Such beauty had been kept from him for almost his entire life. He had known nothing but sand and fire and torment. Naboo had none of that, at least not that he'd seen. It was soothing and calming. Just like Padmé.

A sigh escaped him before he could stop it. It was the first time he'd allowed himself such a weakness in years. But he hardly noticed. All of his thoughts were on Padmé. It was unbecoming of a Sith Lord to be so, but he was...worried. There was no use denying it, he, Darth Vader, the Dark Lord of the Sith, was worried. And it wasn't even that he was even worried about his power or the loss of control. He was worried about some woman.

But Padmé Amidala wasn't just some woman. No one could call Padmé Amidala anything short of amazing. She had accomplished more in her short life than most people did in a life time. There was little that she could not accomplish once she put her mind to it. She was brave, bold, and determined. She was the sort of woman that didn't back down easily or give up. In sort, she was the sort of person that even the infamous Lord Vader could respect.

The whisper of nightly noises grated on the Sith's nervous, contrasting so sharply with the cacophonous raged that was constantly brewing within him. He hated being here, in this place that reminded him so much of the senator. It was made worse that she wasn't even here with him. At least on the ship he'd been able to go into her room at night and watch over her as she slept. At least then he knew she was safe and away from danger, where he could protect her.

There was, however, the very strong possibility that she was safer with her parents than here in the palace with him right now. Practically the entire galaxy had known she was returning home and staying here beside the queen. The sudden change of plan might have actually been to their advantage... but that didn't mean that Vader liked it. He hated it. There was just too much distance between himself and the senator. There hadn't been this much since before she'd first come to live with him. Now that he could no longer just walk down the hall to her door to look in at her, now that he could not hear her wandering about, feel the Light she emanated from her close proximity...



Only the Dark Side of the Force was powerful, only it could help him attain all that he desired and lusted after. So why did his very core ache with the loss of Padmé's Light? Why did he hear whispers of a voice he'd never listened to telling him to give in? To let go of his hate? His fear? His sorrow?

There were moments, like now, in the quiet of the night, when he was alone, that Vader actually... considered it. It was not in Vader's nature to take anyone or anything by its word alone, or to trust, but this voice, the one that came to him when he was at his calmest... it made sense. It only ever whispered things to him that he'd thought about himself. There were times when even Darth Vader became nearly overwhelmed with his own anger, with his power. And the more his master told him to give in to his anger, while it seemed as though he became more powerful, he also felt so heavy. In these quiet moments, he had to wonder, would it not just be easier, would he not be freer, if he just let it all go?

A murmur through the Force told him it was so, but he tried to brush it off. Being here, in the complete serenity of this planet that seemed to exude Light, was not good for him. It was causing him to become unbalanced and he had to wonder at his master letting him come here. Sidious had been suspicious of him for something, and it made little sense that he would force his apprentice into a situation that could very well become dangerous to his views of the Force. Or was this some sort of test?

A growl escaped the Sith. Tests. Always tests. He had been a faithful apprentice since as long as he could rightly remember. While he hated his master, he'd never done anything to oppose him, never stepped out of line. Well, it didn't matter. Soon Vader would be testing him, and it would be for life or death. Everything was falling together nicely, and soon the name Palpatine would be all but forgotten across the galaxy, replaced by Emperor Vader.

Soon it would all come together. Soon he would be free of the bastard that had tortured him for sixteen years. And when the time came, he would show no mercy, would hold nothing back. His master's head would look so lovely on a pike. It would be his trophy, his greatest triumph! All will know of his greatness, his power! They would all soon be bowing before him and know that he was great and terrible!

...but Padmé wouldn't. He knew that she would rather die than bow down before him. Despite their current situation, he knew that she held no real delusions of him. She knew what he was and what he was capable of. Several times already she'd called him out on his actions, whether it was with actual words of rebuke or a look. She knew exactly what he was, and that's why he knew exactly what she would do when the day came when he was emperor.

It was a miracle that she didn't show much hostility towards him anymore. Her reactions to his comings had greatly changed since their little bargain. Because of the link he'd established within her mind, he knew that she, beyond logic or reason, liked him. Or rather, she liked what he was when he was with her and her alone, when they slept with each other. The disgust and hatred for the Sith Lord was still very much present. Somehow the senator knew that there was someone else lurking within him, could differentiate between him and Vader. She wanted the other person, not Vader, not the man that would one day be emperor. She would not want to be with him, to be by his side as empress...

That thought hurt. More than it should have. Who cared what she thought? She was insignificant next to him, next to the power of the Dark Side. Who cared if she hated him? If

he chose to have an empress, he could make her be his, whether she wanted to or not. She would be helpless against him. He could keep her beside him forever and no one would be able to ever take her away from him again! She would be his and his alone! There would be no one to stop him!

...but could he really do that? Of course he was certainly capable of doing it. He knew how to make people do what he wanted. But could he do that to her? Padmé had such a vibrant spirit, so headstrong and free. To trap her with him, to bind her to him for all time would not only break her, something he wasn't sure he could stand to see, but he would be damning her to hell along with him. Vader held no illusions as to what would happen to him once he departed this world and he did not fear it. He believed he suffered more here than anything hell could afford him, but he could not allow Padmé to suffer his fate. He just couldn't.

Some Sith Lord you're turning out to be, that cruel mockery of a reminder of his former self taunted. I wasn't aware mighty Sith Lords cared about lowly senators?

He wanted to argue back that he didn't, but that was a lie. Vader found he didn't have it in him to lie to himself. At least not anymore. Denial was a form of weakness he'd learned, and to lie to himself would only further him down that path of feebleness.

You do care for her, the voice continued, the Force seeming to whisper affirmation of the fact. Why do you run from the feeling?

"Because it's weakness," he answered back firmly. Or as firmly as he could.

Since when do you run from anything?

Vader remained silent.

It's time to stop running. It's time to think of someone else before yourself. It's time you tell her you care.

But how could he tell her? He had never been the sort of person to bare his feelings. He'd actually never been given the chance. To tell Padmé all that he felt, to show her his feelings meant opening himself up for hurt, rejection, and humiliation. He wasn't sure he could do that. The doubts within his mind, the call of the Dark Side were too strong. He was so close. So close to achieving everything he'd ever wanted...

Not everything. You'll have power, you'll have the throne, but you'll be completely alone. Padmé won't want to be with a monster. And you'll be everything your mother never wanted you to be.

No. That was enough. Turning away, Vader rejected the peaceful view before him and walked back into the darkness of his room. This wasn't right. He couldn't let his mind be turned to such petty things such as his feeling towards the senator. Right now he had to remain alert. The Force was stirring all around him, the Darkness hinting trouble, the Light hinting opportunity. It was curious; he'd never been able to feel the Light Side so acutely before, but over the past several weeks it seemed to be taking stronger hold of him. The best approach he'd found thus far in dealing with it was to just to ignore it since he couldn't get rid of it. But at the moment, it was too strong around him. It had never offered such comfort or

warnings to him before, but he took it in stride. The Darkness was still his ally, always there when he needed it. Even if it took just as much as it gave.

Something was going to happen soon, Vader could feel it. This celebration was going to change everything, the Force was all but telling him this plainly. Now all Vader could do was wait, wait and see what would come. Wait and protect Padmé any way he could. Because whether the Darkness within him liked it or not, he cared about her, and he would rather die than let anything happen to her.

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Out in space, Obi-Wan Kenobi, too, was finding it difficult to take rest. Bail Organa had been wise to get he and Master Yoda off Naboo before Vader's arrival, but even while they were not on the planet, the young Knight could feel the Darkness that suddenly surrounded the once serene sphere. Vader was definitely there, his presence suffocating.

Yet, even with the obvious Darkness, Obi-Wan felt... Light. Not much, not really any, but there was... something there. Just as he had experienced on Geonosis, there was Light swirling in the middle of all that chaotic evil. And it was all emanating from Vader. He'd not told Master Yoda any of this because of his uncertainty, but the more he meditated on it, the more Obi-Wan believed that something strong was not only happening in the Force, but within Vader. He still could not get the anguished cries of the Sith out of his mind or stop seeing how the great demon fell to his knees in torment in that old droid foundry.

Sitting cross legged in a meditative position, looking out at the stars that slowly passed by, Obi-Wan surrendered himself to the Force. He needed help. He needed guidance. He needed Qui-Gon.

"I'm here, Obi-Wan. I've never left."

"Master," the Knight sighed in relief. "Master, please... Nothing's making sense anymore. I just don't understand."

"And what don't you understand, padawan?" Even in the most desperate and dangerous situations, Qui-Gon Jinn's voice was soothing and could calm the most ragged nerves.

"Any of this. You told me that the Chosen One was near, that I would have to help him defeat Vader."

"And so I did."

The younger man frowned in irritation. "Then where is he? And what's happening to Vader?"

The ghost of the old Jedi Master was smiling fondly down at his former apprentice. It annoyed just as much as it comforted the Knight. "Obi-Wan, have you ever stopped to think that perhaps not all is as it seems? That there are different methods of attack than just direct, physical confrontation?"

Obi-Wan was surprised into silence. Another method of fighting? "You mean... you mean that the Chosen One is doing this to Vader?" he asked in a whisper, as though if he spoke too loudly, the reality of the situation would somehow evaporate. "How is that possible?"

Qui-Gon's soft smile was apparent even in his transparent state, just as the fondness was evident in his eyes. "Do not underestimate the power of the Force, my old apprentice. There is much at work here and the Chosen One is playing his part. You must concentrate on yours."

The light admonishment caused shame to fill Obi-Wan, just as it had when he was still a young initiate. "Forgive me, Master. I just... I just wish I knew what I'm supposed to do."

"Wait," the ghost replied simply. "Watch. Listen to the Force. When the time has come, the Chosen One will come to you. Until then, let the Force guide your actions."

"Yes, Master... And, Master?"

"Yes, Obi-Wan?"

The Jedi Knight had to fight a blush from burning his cheeks as he asked, "I don't suppose you can tell me what to do with the upcoming mission to rescue Senator Amidala, can you?"

The same rebellious, mischievous twinkle showed in Qui-Gon's eyes even as an apparition as it had when he was living, and the smirk he suddenly wore was one that Obi-Wan had come to both dread and adore, because it either meant he was going to really hate what was about to happen, or really love it. Right now, the Knight wasn't sure which he would feel. "Nothing."

Obi-Wan sat staring blankly at the glimmer before him, before answering slowly, "'Nothing'?"

That blasted smirk never left the old master's features. "My time has come, Obi-Wan. Be mindful of all you have learned, of all that I have said."

"I will, Master," he stood up, as though to see the other out. It just felt like the right thing to do.

"Remember," Qui-Gon said, looking serious again, just as he was beginning to fade away. "Wait. Watch. Listen. The Force will be with you. Always."

And with that, Master Jinn was gone, and Obi-Wan was left alone once more. At least physically. He could still feel the Force humming about him warmly. So sitting down, much calmer than before, he closed his eyes and tried to slip back into meditation, a true, deep mediation. He had a lot to think about, after all.

If you're out there Chosen One, he thought. I certainly hope you know what you're doing. Darth Vader is not someone who can be tried with easily.

It was amazing to think that there was someone who could defeat the Sith, though. Already Obi-Wan was connecting the dots of what Qui-Gon had told him into the puzzled mystery surrounding Vader. And the results were looking more and more promising.

He understood now, Vader's actions on Geonosis and his obvious problems here. The Chosen One had found a way to attack the Sith Lord from the inside out. While Obi-Wan wasn't sure how this was done, he assumed that it was similar to how healers would probe the minds of their patients. Though the thought of anyone trying to heal Vader, like it was a mental wound, was quite disturbing and seemingly ludicrous to the Jedi. But he had faith in the Chosen One, and he would be ready for when it was time for him to make his move. He would be ready to train the Chosen One. He refused to fail.

But the matter of the Chosen One aside, the young Knight's thoughts turned towards Senator Amidala. He found himself a little disturbed with his master's answer concerning the plot to rescue her. Nothing, Qui-Gon had said, was all he could do. But he couldn't do nothing. The plans had already been laid, and while it was going to be difficult, especially now that they'd had to rethink a few details with Vader so near, there just had to be a way to save the senator.

Listen to the Force, he rebuked himself, and decided to not worry about the future. As Qui-Gon would say, "There is enough in the present to keep the mind occupied." So for the time being, Obi-Wan threw himself into the now, meditating on the peace of the night, of the calm over Naboo, and on the shifting Darkness that lay just beyond.

## 29. A Flurry of Festivites

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Preparing for a ceremony of any sort was always a pain in the ass. It was intensified by the fact that while here to celebrate the eleventh anniversary, Padmé was obliged once more to wear the ceremonial makeup gown of the queen. While she considered herself more of a traditionalist and had worn the makeup, as custom dictated, while Queen of Naboo, it had still been a pain. To ensure that everything was put on perfectly, she's had to wake up hours in advance just to be ready to be seen in the throne room or in public. It had always taken around four hours in the morning for her to become properly adorned and groomed. It was one more aspect of being queen that Padmé had not missed.

But now that she was back for the ceremony, the senator found herself falling back into her old royal routine. At precisely four in the morning, an unmarked speeder had come to the house to pick her up. Although she'd known that this was going to happen, since she hadn't gotten a good night's sleep, Padmé had slept through her alarm and was rudely awakened by Cory shaking her into miserably consciousness. Before she could even yell at him, however, Firmus was already helping her out of bed and wrapping a coat around her and putting on her shoes. Between the two Imperials, while still confused and not completely awake, she was lead out of her room, down the stairs, and into the speeder within three minutes after opening her eyes. From there, they went straight to the palace.

Once out of the speeder, they were met by a group of handmaidens, Dormé among them, and rushed off to be prepared for the day. She had only caught the briefest glimpse of shining black out of the corner of her eye. Her view was blocked when she tried to get a better look at it.

Like every morning as queen, Padmé was stripped and bathed in the finest oils and mineral water to purify her, before she was dried and dressed in her undergarments. She was still too tired to think properly, and didn't feel much like talking, so the entire affair was conducted in relative silence, the only sounds being the rustling of cloth, the clinking of hair accessories, and the like as they combed out her wet hair. While her hair and makeup were being taken care of, she actually dozed off, too exhausted for much else other than sleep, and let the other women just have their way with her.

But now that it was closer to the ceremony time, and the last of her hair was being finished and her makeup had dried, Padmé was much more awake, and anxious. The Ceremony began at eight-thirty, and it was almost eight now and she wasn't even dressed. She knew everything expected of her for this, knew how she was to move, what she had to say and the like, but she was still nervous. She was nervous because this was the first year that the Empire had decided to take 'interest' in this celebration. This was the first time that there would be copious numbers of Storm Troopers in the crowd. The first time that Lord Vader would be in attendance.

The last thought especially made her tense. What would he think of this celebration? More than likely just a waste of time and resources. She knew quite well how much he despised the social gatherings on Coruscant, and couldn't imagine he'd like big, planet-wide celebrations

any better. After living with him for so long and having seen the inside of his room, it was fair to conclude that Vader did not believe in resources on anything that wasn't strictly necessary or practical.

More importantly, however, was not just what he thought about the actual celebration, but what was he going to do during the celebration. With all the fuss of getting ready to leave, preparing speeches and everything else, she'd forgotten to ask what he would be doing while she performed her duties. Surely he wasn't just going to loom over her the entire time... was he? Did he have some sort of responsibility he was expected to participate in? That did not seem like something he would want or would do, but if ordered by the Emperor...

Dear Force, please don't let him have to be part of the presentation! She could just image him losing his temper if someone interrupted a speech of his.

Dormé's concerned visage came into view, snapping the senator from her thoughts. "Are you all right, my lady?" she asked quietly. "You've been rather... quiet all morning."

"Fine," Padmé nodded quickly. "Just a little tired still."

The worry did not leave the other woman's face. "You looked pale all morning. Are you not feeling well?"

Honestly, no, Padmé wasn't, but it was just nerves. She was sure it would all go away once she knew what all was happening and had a schedule. There was no need to cause panic. "I'm perfectly well, thank you, Dormé." She gave a slight smile.

The former handmaiden didn't look convinced, but said nothing. Instead, the other woman helped Padmé to stand, and quickly surrounded the senator, adorning her with the ceremonial dress she would be wearing for the opening of the festival. It was white, as it had been the day she'd officially declared the Trade Federation dispelled from Naboo and to commemorate peace with the Gungans. But unlike the rather simple white dress she'd worn then, this one was heavier with a long train and flowing white sleeves cascading down by her side embroidered with butterflies and flowers. Around her waist was tied a golden sash that matched well with the dramatic golden butterfly and dragonfly headpiece she wore woven in her hair that stood several centimeters tall. Along the sides of her face, gracefully dripping down from the headpiece to frame her face, were strings of pearls and diamonds that fell like the waterfalls of their planet. A few strands were obliged to hang in the middle of her forehead, stopping at her eyebrow line.

All in all, it was a dramatic, elegant sort of look, and it had been quite a while since Padmé had been so dressed up. Her face was white, her lips painted red in the traditional manner of the queens with her dark eyes allowed to stand out against the pale background of her face. It took her back to a time when she'd been so much younger, so much freer. An uncharacteristic nostalgic bloomed in her chest at the thought. She yearned for that freedom back, she yearned for a time when everything seemed greener, lusher, and the galaxy a much simpler place.

But that's not what the reality of the situation was. A knock on the door brought her back to the now, and she turned towards the door and reality with her shoulders square, head high, the regal, grim expression of a queen ornamenting her features. Several troopers entered, causing the other women to take steps back in surprise, before Firmus stepped in his expression strangely calm. "We are all waiting, your highness," he bowed his head.

For now, there was no Padmé, only Amidala, and it showed in her carriage. Tilting her chin higher, the Galactic Senator began walking towards the door, her carriage betraying nothing but grace and poise. There was no time to worry now. Right now she had a job to do, for her people.

As she walked out, she was met with the sight of Queen Jamilia adorned in her own dramatic costume of red and gold, while behind her stood Lord Vader. The queen gave her an apprising once over, appearing just as stately and elegant as usual, while Vader, of course, looked no different. He was still in the same suit with the same stiff posture, seemingly not even look at her. There was no reason as to why he should be any different, and Padmé wasn't sure why she'd wanted him to be.

"Your highness," Padmé inclined her head to the other woman, to show the proper respect for her sovereign.

"Senator," the queen nodded in return. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, your highness."

"Let us then begin."

Together the two women walked side by side through the palace, Vader trailing close behind them like a shadow. Behind him, a contingent of Storm Troopers marched, their synchronized boot falls echoing off the stone, even as the hissing of the Sith's respirator filled the pauses in step. Beside her, Jamilia appeared ever so slightly on edge, telling Padmé that the other woman was agitated with the Imperial company. The senator, having lived and worked so closely with many of these men, felt no discomfort. A strange sort of peace fell over her, knowing that whatever happened over the course of the next several days, she would be all right. Somehow she just knew that she would be safe with Vader standing guard.

At last the party stopped before the main doors of the palace, where the welcoming speeches were to be given on the steps. There the Gungan coterie was waiting for them. Boss Nass bowed low to both women as they approached. "Your highnessness," he addressed Jamilia first, as was proper. "Senator Amidala."

The women both inclined their heads in unison before the Gungan eyes the Sith Lord warily. "Lord Vader," he bowed.

The Sith didn't bother to return the gesture. It was not expected, after all. The Heir to the Empire, instead, crossed his arms, presumably impatient for the ceremony to begin. The Royal Naboo Guards accommodated easily, and opened the doors wide.

Light streamed in, nearly blinding them, and suddenly they were all assaulted with near deafening cry of cheers and the blare of joyous music. Horns blew, drums beat, and the crowd was not to be tamed in their enthusiasm. If she had not been so use to such situations, Padmé might have found herself too scared to move. But as it was, she knew exactly how to behave and walked out with the queen and Vader on either side of her, out into the public embrace.

As her eyes adjusted to the bright morning, delight flowered within her chest. She was really home, with her people. To see them all like this again, to see their smiling faces meant a lot to her. All she had ever wanted was to help people, to make them happy, and it was always a humbling reward to see that what she was doing was really for the good of the



people she loved so dear. All the pain, all of the suffering she endured through her work was made worth it at moments such as these.

Boss Nass stepped forward and Padmé mirrored his actions, going through the no traditional motions, of holding up the orb together, one set of hand Naboo, the other Gungan grasping the ornament of armistice. “Peace!” the Gungan cried, the crowd’s thunderous cheers answering back.

The Celebration of Independence had official opened.

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Vader stood back watching the celebration with curious confusion. The importance and excitement over such events eluded the Sith Lord. He saw very little practicality of such things and could not understand why it was necessary to cram so many beings into one area and openly expose those of higher authority to risk. It was unsanitary hazard for everyone involved.

But then, he was not raised to understand such political niceties. His master had raised him little better than a beast. Celebrations of any sort were a mystery to him, and seen as an utter waste of resources. What good came from all of this? Why was it so necessary?

His master had once said it was a way to reaffirm power and position, to make others remember and perhaps unite them in memory or for a common goal. It was another way to express patriotism, and when ruling something from as small as a local government to the control of the entire galaxy, patriotism was a special and powerful tool. Unity was an illusion based upon what was perceived as common aims, and if used correctly, patriotism could spur support with little actual thought by the masses. It was partially how his master had overthrown the old Republic and established the Empire. It was the same concept as to why the Imperial sign had to be posted everywhere, to remind others of their supposed ‘unity’ and remind them of their place in the new order.

But this celebration was different than the ones his master planned. As he stood watching Senator Amidala give her speech, he couldn’t help but admire the way her strong voice carried over the still audience. The crowd was mesmerized by her, and not in the way that they were with Sidious. The Emperor had to use powerful Force suggestions to capture attention, Padmé had only to use a look, change a tone. The audience here did not seem to be intimidated in the presence of the senator, or eager to flatter. Indeed, the feelings he picked up from the crowd was one of earnest interest and amiability. They were here because they wanted to be here, not because it was expected of them or because they feared the consequences should they not show. These people truly loved Padmé, and he knew that she loved them in return.

What must it have been like to live here, in such a beautiful place, under the caring eye and guardianship of Queen Amidala? What must it have been like to live in a time when the government truly seemed to care about you, and you approved of everything it did? How proud were these people to know that their former queen, their faithful senator, had never stopped caring, had never stopped fighting for them?

It must have been nice, to live in those days under Queen Amidala. At that time, Vader was living on a remote planet, one of his master’s Sith retreats, training. Always training. Most of

the time it had just been he and 3-PO, while his master's droids saw to it that he was punished and locked away at night. While Padmé had been living in a palace, serving a planet as ruler and fighting a war, Vader had been sleeping in the dirt behind bars, a mere slave to his master's whim. That had been over ten years ago now, but still the bitterness and anger over the event was fresh in his mind. Soon he would take his revenge...

His negative thoughts were stalled, however, when he caught sight of movement. Instinctively, his hand itched towards his lightsaber, but he instantly calmed when he saw it was only Padmé returning to his side, her speech finished, the crowd still cheering even as she was no longer in the front. He watched as she moved, the way her body swayed under the silk fabric.

She was so beautiful, so regal, but seeing her like this, he couldn't help but frown. This was not his Padmé, the woman that stayed with him at the base and begged him to stay. This was Amidala, the ruler, the diplomat. Hidden behind thick clothes, crowns, and makeup lay his Padmé, behind her mask of authority.

Still she was so beautiful, but he wished he could see her true face, the one beneath the ceremonial paint. He wished that her long brown hair was free of its binds, out of the headpiece, free to cascade down her back and glisten in the sun naturally. He longed to see her smile, to see joy shining in her eyes, not having to be muted due to the solemnity of the ceremony.

So beautiful yet forced to remain hidden from so many. But Vader knew the truth, knew what this woman could be when given the opportunity. He had seen her at her best, at her worst, and knew that there was so much more to her than what she allowed the galaxy to see. She was so much lovelier than any of them knew. He knew how she could move, how she could sound, the picture of her gorgeous body lying under him. No one else in the galaxy knew her the way he knew her, and while it was gratifying, strangely, it saddened Vader. She had to hide so much away, and he knew she wanted to share at least some of who she really was.

At last, the senator came to a stop beside him, and looked out over the crowd, her chin raised high in pride. She had every reason to be proud of herself, and Vader found himself feeling pride for her. She had spoken very well, had held herself with far more dignity than any of the others had. The celebration was to commemorate Naboo's retained independence from the Trade Federation, but in actuality, Vader believed that it should be a celebration of Padmé. No one knew just how amazing this woman was. Without her, his master's plan would have succeeded, and the creation of the Empire would have come about in a wholly different manner, perhaps sooner, but had ultimately been forced to change because of one young queen.

Queen Jamilya was now speaking to the crowd, and Vader found he could not pay much attention to her. He was not interested. All he could find within himself to care about was Padmé. It was so strange, how they had come together. They were so different from one another, different in nearly every conceivable way. It was reflected quite nicely at that moment in their chosen attire: black and white. Darkness and Light.

Did she know how much pain she was causing him, he wondered? Did she understand all that he had done for her? Was willing to do for her? Did she understand what she was doing

to him?

Dark eyes suddenly turned towards him, and it was only then that Vader realized he had been obviously staring down at her. Somehow she seemed to know where his eyes were, even thru the mask. They stared at one another in silence, both behind their masks. A sudden spark was created between them, seeming to draw them closer together. Senator Amidala was not Force sensitive, but she was quite empathetic to it. Through their mental link, Vader knew she had felt some of what he'd just been feeling. She knew him better than anyone, but she did not know enough. There was so much more he could tell her, so much more he should tell her, he wanted to...

"Padmé," he whispered, watching as her chest began to heave and her lips part ever so slightly. "I—"

Another explosion of cheers erupted around them, startling both the Sith Lord and the senator from their trance. Quickly assessing the situation, Vader realized that the queen had finished her speech, and the time of true celebration had begun. The moment that had been created between he and Padmé had evaporated away.

Once more, the male Gungan stepped towards Padmé, offering her his hand, and the small woman obliged, going forward with him to face the cheering crowd as her duty dictated. They raised their conjoined hands in the air, causing more applause if it were possible. And together, the original founders of the Naboo-Gungan Peace walked back into the palace together, the queen walking directly after them.

Whatever had just happened, whatever had been about to happen was left forgotten. Right now, Vader knew that he had a job to do, and nothing got between him and his responsibility. So, turning with a flourish of his cape, he stalked after the royals and back into the palace. It appeared that the unspoken truth would remain unspoken after all.

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After the introduction of the ceremony, for diplomats, things became quite dull. While the people were allowed to party and have fun in the festival, Padmé and others in authority spent the remainder of the morning and afternoon in meetings, discuss Naboo affairs of the planet and within the Empire. While it was her job, the senator found herself dreading to go.

Her nerves were once again frayed and she was extremely on edge. What Vader had said to her while outside on the steps had affected her deeply. It was not from what he had said—he hadn't even been allowed to finish—but the way he had spoken, the emotions she'd felt coming from him... Just thinking about it sent a chill down her spin. What had he been going to say? She had never heard his voice so gentle, so... desolate. Whatever he had been attempting was important, she could sense that, but now that moment was gone. It took so much to get him to open up, Padmé feared that whatever had been so important to disrupt the ceremony would now never be known to her.

And once they entered the throne room, gone was the tender whisper and the gentle plead of her name and once more Lord Vader had returned. As the meetings began, the Sith Lord was back completely as he cast a dark, foreboding shadow over the company of Naboo folks. Back was the demanding creature that made more threats than requests.

The entire day carried on in this fashion, Padmé doing her best to do her job, but all the while lamenting at the lost opportunity of hearing Vader, or rather, the true man behind the mask that she had so very little glimpses of. Luckily, politics were little changed now that there was an Empire dictating most of the planet's affairs, and she did not have to pay too close of attention. Nor did anyone seem to notice how she became lost in her own thoughts.

When the lunch break came around, she was relieved and made her way almost instantly to Vader's side, only to realize that he was quickly walking away from her. He was not going to attempt to talk to her again. That hurt. Surely he realized how curious she was, that she wanted to know more about him? But like usual, he gave her just the slightest taste, before cruelly turning his back on her, ignoring her.

Instead, she spent the noontime eating a light meal with Boss Nass, catching up with the Gungans. Jar Jar was there too, to take her mind off of the disappointment that had come from Vader's silence. It was pleasant, calm, but it wasn't what she necessarily wanted.

After lunch there were more meetings, only this time, Vader did not attend as the topics were of local affairs. Wherever the Sith had gone, she couldn't help but wonder if he was off with Piett talking further about 'Black Hand' as Cory stayed by her side. Whatever he was really doing, she hoped that no one was in danger.

By the time business was concluded, it was after three in the afternoon. Thankfully, they were all dismissed to retire before the dinner being held that night at six. All Padmé wanted to do was take a nap, but she knew that was probably out of the cards. More than likely she would have to just start getting ready again as she certainly had to change into formal dinner attire. Sometimes ceremony was a real pain in the ass.

As she made her way back to her room here at the palace, Cory following close behind, the handmaidens attending her soon fell into step as well. When they made it to the door of her room, the senator all but collapsed. She just felt so exhausted. Perhaps it would be a good idea to take some sort of sleeping pills tonight if she found she couldn't sleep again. She had to get some rest or she wouldn't be able to function for the remainder of the festivities.

Thankfully she found out that the chosen hair style of the evening was relatively simple and she would not have to spend hours preparing. And with the main ceremony complete, she could wash off the white makeup. Putting on her usual makeup wouldn't take much time later. So, excusing herself after she was helped out of her headdress and dress, she went to lay down for a short nap. She was out the moment her head hit the pillow. Unfortunately, after what only felt like a minute of sleep, she was dragged back into consciousness nearly two hours later. She almost felt worse now than when she'd gone to sleep.

But this time, instead of the traumatic shaking and being all by pushed out the door, the handmaidens were much gentler, and waking up wasn't so very bad. As she got up and was once more prepared for an evening of stiff formalities and etiquette, the senator couldn't help the heaviness that fell upon her shoulders. It was at times like these that she truly considered just retiring. No one would blame her, of course, and maybe then she could just take a simple nap and not be shaken by Storm Troopers or dressed and made-up by handmaidens.

"My lady?"

"Hmm?" Padmé looked up to once again see Dormé's worried face.

"Dinner will begin in a few minutes... are you sure you're well? I could always give them your apologies—"

"No, no, that's quite all right," she smiled weakly as she stood and the last of her robes were adjusted and arranged. "It's just dinner. After I can go home and rest."

And she meant it. After the dinner, she was going to leave and fall straight into bed and not get up until at least nine tomorrow. She didn't have any obligations until one tomorrow. She would be free to waste most of the morning away in bliss, and she planned to. But right now, it was dinner time.

As she entered the dining room with Cory in tow, Padmé was momentarily surprised to see Vader standing beside the queen as she and the other guests mingled before dinner was announced. "Senator," the queen called when her eyes fell upon the older woman.

Padmé took a deep breath before she strode over, making sure not to rush or go too slow. She stubbornly kept her eyes from glancing towards the Sith. He had ignored her, it was time to return the favor. "Your highness," she bowed.

"Senator," Jamilia seemed not to notice her manners. "Due to an... unfathomable error in the seating arrangement that left out Lord Vader, you will have to sit to my left tonight."

Unable to stop herself, the senator gave a quick glance at the Sith, who kept stubbornly quiet with his arms crossed over his chest. "I see," she said slowly. Who would have thought that Darth Vader, the creature that had never been seen eating, that never took off his helmet, would want to join a dinner party? "Then where will Boss Nass be sitting, your majesty?"

"He will be sitting to Lord Vader's other side."

"No," Padmé was quickly shaking her head. She would not allow her friend or the Gungans to appear to be bumped down lower in the social order. "That won't be necessary. Allow him to keep his proper place. I will sit beside Lord Vader."

Jamilia raised a painted brow, but said only, "Are you certain?"

"Yes, your highness."

"Very well. Ring the chimes," she said, turning towards a servant.

With the chimes sounding, the dinner officially began. All the diplomatic and important guests gathered about the table and waited to be seated after the queen. All except Vader, who was apparently exercising his authority to do as he wished as Heir to the Empire, and sat down before the queen. But while Padmé was annoyed with the Sith for the unnecessary display of precedence, Jamilia chose not to acknowledge the lack of respect to her authority as sovereign of the planet. And while the other guests looked uncomfortable, they also said nothing and merely sat after the queen.

The instant they were seated, the servants came rushing in, presenting the finest culinary delights that Naboo could afford. Not completely surprising, nothing was set before Vader. And while the rest of them ate, the Sith sat with a straight back, looking around the table. Padmé stole side glances at him, wondering what he was really doing here, what his aim was. Surely he wasn't here because it was the polite thing to do? She knew he had better things to do with his time than tedious socializing and watching others eat.

So after a few minutes of staying silent, and while the others were engaging in strained, but polite conversation, Padmé turned her attention towards the Sith and stare up at him boldly. “So Lord Vader,” she began confidently, “what brings you to this dinner party this evening?”

Those closest to her fell completely silent at the audacious question, but she could sense only mild annoyance from Vader. There would be no big scene made for the moment. “I was under the impression, Senator, that I was invited. Am I wrong?”

“No. But I find it curious you would want to come, considering your infamous reputation for skipping such events.”

“Senator,” the queen hissed, but Padmé chose to ignore her.

“You would rather I not have attended this evening?” Vader pressed, the annoyance spiking to anger.

“Not at all,” the senator refuted. “As I said, I’m curious as to why you chose to attend this dinner when you’ve refused other, more illustrious invitations. It’s an honor to have you present.”

“Do not flatter me, Senator. What is it that you want?”

“I want nothing,” Padmé turned her eyes back to her food, gracefully taking a bite. “I am simply... surprised that you are in attendance is all. I know how you despise politics.”

“I do not despise politics,” Vader denied, rotating more towards her, all by turning his back to the queen. “I dislike pointless debate and useless dramatics.”

A smirk found its way onto the senator’s lips as she nodded. “As do I,” she agreed. “It is fortunate that this afternoon’s conferences were productive for both our sakes.”

Vader chose not to answer immediately, but continued to stare at her for a long while. The others around them assumed it was safe to speak again, and started up new conversations just before the Sith decided to speak again. “You have curious table conversation, Senator. I do not understand what you wish to gain here.”

“Merely conversation,” she smiled slightly. “It’s considered polite to engage in it when attending these functions.”

“I am well aware. Although I do not understand why you wish to engage in discussion with me.”

With the other conversations humming around them, the rest of the guests studiously ignoring the now privatized exchange between the esteemed senator and the Dark Lord, all playfulness melted away from Padmé’s features. Turning a somber expression towards him, she replied quietly, for his hearing only, “I only want to talk to you. I want to know you. Is that so wrong?”

The earnest declaration was met with silence. A cold, hard silence that sent dread coursing through the senator. But after a few cycles of his respirator, quietly, Vader answered with a crushing, “Yes.”

It took every ounce of control Padmé possessed not to start screaming at him, to start demanding answers. But picking a fight with Darth Vader was definitely something she didn't want to do in such a public place, nor did she wish to potentially endanger everyone there because Vader couldn't control his temper. So, swallowing her anger and hurt, she took a deep breath and asked, "Why?"

Vader turned away from her to gaze across the table, leaving Padmé to stare at him. She knew she was being dismissed, but she just couldn't let it go. She had to know. She wanted answers. And just when she was going to throw caution to the wind, a gentle whisper inside her mind stopped her in her tracks. "Because there are some things that no one should ever know, Padmé. For their own good."

And thus ended Padmé's dinner discussion. She did not speak the rest of the evening. Didn't feel much like talking after being all but rejected by Vader, and she certainly didn't feel much like eating, despite having been starving beforehand.

When the evening came to a close, Vader escorted her in silence to an unmarked speeder that would take her back to her house. Cory was already there, waiting with Piett. As they neared, the Sith commanded, "Leave us," and the two men she considered her friends turned and entered the ship.

Now alone with Vader, she finally let the hurt she felt show, and stared down at the floor with watery eyes. Padmé had never gotten herself entangled with men before, had avoided them and the messes of relationships completely. But now she had gotten herself into such a complicated situation and involving a man she hardly knew and feared and who was generally just not good for her and she didn't know what to do. She had been stupid enough to fall for charms that didn't even exist within him. Now, once more, she was in an emotional wreck because of him, the only man in the galaxy that could do this to her.

Startled out of her reserve by a leather gloved hand lightly tilt her chin up, Padmé found herself staring up into the mask of Darth Vader, into the face of him. He hadn't done this since the first night she had stayed with him. This time, however, it was much gentler, and it caused her wounded heart to break. "Goodnight, Padmé," he muttered.

"Goodnight," she whispered, before turning and rushing into the speeder. She had to get away from him. The way he was treating her, the confusion that surrounded him and their relationship was psychological torture. She couldn't keep doing this. Things had to change. Padmé just wished she knew how to make it so.

## 30. Part 1: Into the Fray

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The Force was stirring all around him, whispering, screaming, calming, anxious. Vader didn't know quite what to make of it. The moment he'd felt it, he knew he'd have to sit down and mediate, to sort through the mixed signals he was receiving, but it did little good. Nothing could soothe this. It was the same problem he had been having over the past several months, only now it was far more incensed.

The Light was mixing too thoroughly with the Darkness inside him. The Darkness was alarmed, warning, while the Light was soothing, calming. They were warring with one another for his soul and Vader wasn't sure which he wanted more to win. Or if there even could be a winner.

It was nearly dawn and he was exhausted. There was never really any sleep for the Sith Lord, stories of Darth Plagueis had scared him sufficiently as a child, but what little rest Vader allowed for himself had been lost due to the warring nature brewing within him. Slowly but surely they were tearing him apart. He had tried throughout the course of the night to find a balance between them, but none could be found. At least not while he was still keeping one foot in Darkness, a safety he felt necessary. He couldn't leave the Dark Side, but the Light was pulling at him, pulling and stretching. It was painful, terrifying and Vader wasn't sure why he also felt so exhilarated.

Regardless, he'd been kept awake all night with no rest. While the battle had raged, he found he could not keep still, couldn't sit for more than a minute, and thus decided to stalk around the palace, checking on the troopers, the other Imperial personnel, and even the shuttles. He had to keep himself occupied or he knew he'd fall into the insanity that the Force was driving him to.

All this torment was all because of Padmé; it had to be because of her. Yesterday had not gone at all how he'd wanted it. Sure, the ceremony went well enough, the meetings rather well, but his limited interaction with her had certainly not been what he'd intended. What he had started to say to her on the steps after her speech had been a mistake. He hadn't meant to even begin it. He'd hoped she'd forget he even spoke at all, but of course she didn't. At dinner, she even seemed to pick up what he'd wanted to say in the first place. He'd wanted to tell her everything, she wanted to know, but of course he couldn't tell, for her own good just as much for his own comfort. And because she couldn't understand this, he'd ended up hurting her.

Again.

For the second time in such a short span of time, Vader sighed. What was happening to him? He wasn't the Sith Lord he should be. He wanted... he wanted so much, yet not for himself.

The only way to fix all of this was to just let Senator Amidala go, to release her from their bargain and throw himself into the currents of the Dark Side once and for all... But he



couldn't do that. The pull of the Light, of Padmé, was far too strong. He couldn't leave her. He wasn't sure he was strong enough to let her go.

There was something happening outside of himself, too, something was going to happen, but Vader couldn't even guess as to what it was. He was too tired and the war within him wouldn't settle so he could peer into the Force and see what it was. It was difficult to stay alert when so exhausted, but he knew he had to. He sent word to all the Storm Troopers to be ready, just in case. They would probably think it was just another drill, and perhaps that's all it would turn into being. But it was better to be prepared than to fail. He was not going to risk anything happening while he was not at full strength. For Padmé's sake.

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Unfortunately, the day had finally come, the anxious day where they were going to rescue Senator Amidala. Looking over to Master Yoda, who was sitting in light meditation across from him in the shuttle, Obi-Wan couldn't stop himself from fidgeting. It was extremely rude and no master would have allowed such behavior, but he couldn't help it, and he was no longer a padawan. So the twisting of the hands continued without interruption.

He had a bad feeling about this. Yet while naturally pessimistic, the young Jedi tried to remain positive and went over their plan in his head. They'd gone over this extensively all day the day before. Obi-Wan knew the entire layout of the palace as well as the surrounding city. He knew exactly where Senator Amidala's room was located from anywhere within the palace. He knew all of the escape routes. He even knew the secret passages from the throne room to the library. There would also be a contingent of hidden Rebels waiting around the city listening in on their mission and appraising the situation should anything go wrong. The would be ready to search and rescue the senator if, for whatever reason, the Jedi failed.

But even with knowing all this, he was apprehensive. Who wouldn't be? This wasn't just sneaking in and eluding Storm Troopers, they were going to face Darth Vader. The Sith that had destroyed the entire Jedi Temple almost single handedly. The same creature that had shattered Obi-Wan's only now recently healed arm with a single blow. The creature that could set an entire foundry to motion through the Force while not even concentrating that hard. Qui-Gon's advice rang within his ears, and the Knight found himself sweating more and more the closer they came to the planet's surface.

"Master Yoda," he said quietly, waiting as green eyes slowly opened. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"Over this we have gone, Obi-Wan," the old master sighed.

"I know, Master, but it's just... what if we can't accomplish this? We will die for nothing, and then what will become of the Jedi?"

"Faith you must have, in the Force, Obi-Wan," the green Jedi replied stiffly. "The Force is my ally. What is yours?"

Knowing the old rebuke, the younger being sat back, knowing he had gone too far. Yoda refused to fail and that was all there was to it. They were going to do this even if Vader hacked them to pieces first. He just hoped that the Chosen One was ready to face the Sith

without him, because Obi-Wan had a strange feeling that things were going to go very, very wrong.

Descending into the Naboo atmosphere was like being dipped into tar. It was so dark and thick, nearly suffocating the Force sensitives with the Dark Side. Vader was definitely here. The young Jedi hoped that he and his master were covering their Force signatures well enough so that they would at least not be detected until they entered the palace. But from what Obi-Wan had gathered about the Sith thus far, Vader probably already knew they were coming and had laid a trap... unless the Chosen One was keeping him distracted? They could only hope.

After receiving permission to land by the ground patrol, the two Jedi managed to set down within the royal hanger, Bail having contacted an operative within the palace that gave them clearance. It was still early in the morning, and with getting ready for the day's ceremonies, they would have little trouble getting around. Bail had made the rather optimistic suggestion that perhaps by doing this so early, maybe Vader would still be resting. There was little chance of that, but neither Jedi had had the heart to inform their friend of this.

"To the senator, you will go," Yoda said once the shuttle came to a halt.

"Yes, Master."

"Stopping you cannot afford," the green master went on as they unbuckled their straps. "Once the senator you have acquired, leave."

Obi-Wan's heart pounded against his ribs at what was not being said but explicitly implied. "Yes, Master."

Lightsabers in hand, the two remaining Jedi exited the shuttle, Yoda on the Knight's back as Obi-Wan sprinted through the halls. "Evade and avoid the troopers, stop for the Sith only," the Grand Master said sternly, like his conscience whispering in his ear.

"Yes, Master."

At a steady run, the two flew through the palace halls, both sending out Force suggestions to turn the troopers' attention away from them as they slipped past. The halls were unnaturally quiet and it put Obi-Wan on edge. It was still so early, the sun not even out yet, but still. Surely there would be more people up than this? There was a full day of festivities going on, after all. There even seemed to be less Storm Troopers on guard than there should be. Once more, Qui-Gon's advice rose to mind, but the young Knight tried to shake it from his mind. He could not afford to listen to such talk. Maybe his old master had been mistaken?

As they turned sharply around a corner, Obi-Wan's eyes widened in surprise and he tried to skid to an abrupt stop. It was not soon enough, however, as a red 'saber blade came lunging towards his throat. A pull of the Force sent the Knight hurtling backwards and out of the way, while Master Yoda jumped from his back to meet the blade of the Sith. The green master had obviously pushed the younger Jedi out of the way of danger. "GO!" he cried forcefully, working to keep the Sith's attention on him.

Not wanting to waste any time, not wanting to argue, Obi-Wan did as he was told and turned around, running the other way. Every instinct told him to go back, to help the aged master, but he knew his duty. Yoda would have to hold off Vader without him. It was his job

to retrieve the senator. But unable to stop himself from looking back, the young man was just in time to see Yoda flipping all about with fantastic, Force aided leaps, in the near vain hopes of catching the Sith off guard and overwhelm with his speed. As Obi-Wan knew from experience, Vader was much faster than anyone would think, and so the two were locked in a rather even battle.

It was clear that Master Yoda would at least hold his own for the time being and there would be little the younger Jedi could do to help for the time being. So feeling a bit better with the situation, Obi-Wan managed to navigate his way through the twisting halls and towards the senator's room from a different direction. There were Storm Troopers posted outside, but he did not stop even as they fired at him. Instead, he deflected their volleys, bouncing the bolts back at them, until both had been hit with their own shots. And not slowing for a moment, the Jedi rammed himself against the door, breaking open the lock and rushing inside.

Senator Amidala was sitting up in bed, her hair down and messed with a blaster clearly clutched in her hands. Being so startled, she even shot a few times at him, but Obi-Wan dodged them neatly. "Senator Amidala!" he called, panting. "Come quickly, I'm here to..." he trailed off as he got closer to the bed. Despair nearly overwhelmed him. "You're not the senator."

The young woman in the bed was staring at him with wide, brown eyes in something akin to awe. "Y-you're a Jedi!" she breathed.

Ignoring the obvious statement, Obi-Wan looked about the room, in case the senator was hiding somewhere or there was a hidden room attached. He didn't see any possible places, nor did he remember seeing any secret rooms on the layout he'd studied. Senator Amidala was not here. The last time Sola had contacted them she'd said that her sister would be here at the palace.

"Blast!" he cursed under his breath, beginning to panic. What was he supposed to do now? He should have known Vader would have a decoy!

"She's with her family."

Obi-Wan turned to stare at the impersonator as she stood up out of bed. "What?"

"She's staying with her parents," the woman said again. "Just outside of town, on Millaflower street. Second house to the right."

"Why are you helping me?" he asked suspiciously. He had little time to waste, but in his years of exile, he had learned to be cautious and to never take people at their word. You never knew who was working for whom.

The young woman smiled sadly at him, apparently understanding and not taking offense. "I will always help the Jedi," she declared solemnly. "And I remember you. You were one of the ones who helped my mistress with the Trade Federation."

The Force rang with the truth of her words, but it always rang with the warning of alarm. Master Yoda was in grave danger. "Brilliant!" the young man cried as he turned and ran back out the door, not looking back even as he called, "Thank you!"

This was not going well, not at all. While it shouldn't have been a surprise to him, Obi-Wan was finding he couldn't get over the idea of Vader having planted a decoy for them to find. Of course Vader would have known something was going to happen, but still. Bail had said they should have the element of surprise, but apparently that element meant nothing when facing Darth Vader.

Everything was already starting to unravel, and Obi-Wan wished he'd just listened to Qui-Gon. But he couldn't stop now, not in the middle of this. He had to see this mission to its conclusion, whether that was a successful one or not.

The Force sang of danger, and it didn't take much effort to discern that Master Yoda was slowly losing ground to the Sith Lord. It had been expressively implied that should anything go wrong, Obi-Wan was not to go back for Yoda, or to help the green master in any way. The mission was solely about getting Senator Amidala out and to safety. But surely the order didn't apply now since Obi-Wan didn't even have the senator. He couldn't just abandon the Grand Master to a horrid fate with the Sith! For all he knew, they were the last two Jedi in the galaxy, how could he abandon his master?

But the Force was with him in a strange way, as the decision was suddenly no longer up to him. Out of nowhere, half a wall suddenly collapsed. Startled, the Jedi leapt out of the way, but was not fast enough to avoid some of the larger pieces of debris that fell on him. No serious damage had been caused, but it halted the Knight's mad dash and he was forced to stop. The dust that suddenly filled the air choked him, causing him to bend over to cough and gag.

Looking up, lightsaber at the ready a moment later, Obi-Wan saw Master Yoda lying on the ground, bleeding, shaking his head, apparently shell-shocked. It took only a moment for the younger Jedi to realize that his master had been thrown thru the stone wall. And following the path of destruction, his eyes easily came to rest upon a massive shadow illuminated in red.

"Kenobi," the deep bass voice sent shivers down his spine. Vader had learned his name. "I see we are fated to meet again."

Stepping in front of his master, hoping to give Yoda time to recover, Obi-Wan raised his 'saber in a defensive posture. "Hello there," he greeted back in false cheer. "Nice to see you again, Darth."

The Sith Lord growled before he suddenly charged forward. Obi-Wan was almost instantly pushed back, overwhelmed by the brute force, but he managed to side step out of the locked position. If there was one thing he had learned from his last duel with this beast it was that it was unwise to meet the Sith's blows head on. If it were possible, evasion was the best bet for staying in one piece longer. If allowed to, Vader's natural strength could easily crush and overpower.

The mock-pleasantness of before had gone just as soon as it had come, and the Knight found himself in for the fight of his life. Vader was angry. Really angry. It was not like before when they had fought either. There was something brewing within the creature, something that would not bode well for any of them. Last time the Sith had warmed up to his fury, now he had apparently been irate before the fight had even begun.

When a blow had nicked Obi-Wan's arm, he cried out in pain, momentarily dropping his lightsaber down lower. Blue-green eyes widened in horror as the red blade came once more rushing towards his neck, but a sudden flash of green clashed with the Sith blade in the nick of time. Master Yoda had recovered and was once again in the fray. It didn't take long for the younger man to recover, and soon, he and the Grand Master teamed up to duel with the Sith Lord.

Yoda had been considered the greatest of all the Jedi, in wisdom as well as in battle. As a youngling, it had always seemed that nothing and no one could ever harm the Grand Master of the Jedi Order. Master Yoda was just too powerful. So it was greatly disheartening to see that not only was Vader able to easily block and evade the tiny master's strikes, but he could do so while also fighting another Jedi at the same time. It was little wonder now why the Jedi at the Temple had fallen. This beast now seemed unstoppable.

After several tense minutes of blow after blow, the Jedi and the Sith pushed away from one another, breathing heavily as they circled each other. Storm Troopers had come by now, as well as royal guards, attracted by the noise. They all stood waiting, watching, none daring to get between Lord Vader and his prey.

"Away you must go," Yoda muttered. "Your mission you have yet to accomplish."

"I can't just leave you, Master," Obi-Wan pleaded, hoping that the other being would see reason. This was a lost cause, there was no reason to keep fighting like this. Their best bet was to get away and get Yoda to the healer awaiting them on the Rebel cruiser that would be orbiting the planet very soon.

"Go!" the Grand Master commanded, the usually mild voice strained and filled with pain.

It was so very difficult to obey, but the Knight eventually nodded, and after faking an attack while Yoda went in for his own, he turned tail and ran, taking out several Storm Troopers on his way. Blasts happened all around him, forcing him to stand and dispel the troopers before he continued. They were easy enough, but the sound of the fierce lightsaber battle behind him grated on Obi-Wan's nerves. It hurt his heart to know he was leaving his master here to die. He just couldn't do it. How was he just expected to desert Yoda?

But he had to. He was a Jedi Knight and his mission was all that mattered above all things. If the rescue of the Senator did not go over well, then he had to survive, at least in order to train the Chosen One. That, above all else, was what matter.

"Do not let him escape!" Vader's booming command echoed throughout the palace, and it seemed to attract more troopers.

The damn burst and it became utter chaos. Storm Troopers were firing in every direction, Darth Vader and Master Yoda were locked in fierce battle, all the while having to dodge blaster bolts, and startled palace inhabitants foolishly came out of their rooms, curious as to what was going on. It ended up that Obi-Wan had to protect several of the people that stupidly ambled into the middle of the battle, forcing him to once more slow his progress of getting away.

The minutes stretched on into eternity, as everything seemed to fall into madness, but eventually, an opening occurred. When it did, Obi-Wan knew he had to take it or be trapped

here and eventually hunted down by Vader or shot by a trooper. Gathering what Force he could, the Knight, in a burst of unnatural speed, fled the scene.

He did not make it far, however, when he heard Qui-Gon's voice scream "Behind you!" Instinctively, he thrust his lightsaber down behind his back, to deflect whatever was coming his way. He expected a blaster bolt, but that was not what he got.

Instead, Obi-Wan was knocked forward off his feet, his lightsaber flying from his hand, as a blast of lightning flew over his head. He landed with a hard, "Ooff," on his stomach, hitting his head against the marble floor. He wasn't sure, but he thought he perhaps blacked out for just a moment, but sat up quickly when he came back to his sense. With his head ringing, he looked out over the bazar battlefield. Everything around him seemed to go into slow motion.

In a daze, the young Knight watched as the stream of lightning continued to flow out from Vader's fingertips, destroying the wall now behind Obi-Wan in a massive explosion. There were screams from all around, and the firing of blaster had ceased with the unexpected explosion. Master Yoda was hanging by the neck from within Vader's grasp, clutching at the Sith's hand in an attempt to free himself. Everything suddenly just seemed to stop as the fighters went into a sort of shock over what had just happened, Vader included.

"Go, Obi-Wan! Go!"

There was no more time to lose. Taking advantage of the situation, Obi-Wan jumped up, calling his lightsaber to his hand, and was sprinting off again, towards the hanger in a matter of moment. He had to find a speeder to take him to the senator.

"NO!" Vader's thunderous cry rang out, and this time, the Jedi turned back around, ready for the lightning that came his way.

It proved to be too powerful for him, however, and Obi-Wan was once more knocked off his feet, though he managed to keep hold of his lightsaber. But strangely, as he sat up, there was no Sith rushing towards him, no red 'saber swiftly coming down to finish him. Instead, as he scrambled to get back to his feet, there was... nothing. Vader was gone, Master Yoda laying discarded on the floor.

Sudden shots rang out, only this time, it was not from the troopers. Snapping his head over, the Jedi saw the woman who had impersonated the senator and several other women with blasters now rushing to the scene, securing the perimeter after having taken out the troopers. "Get up!" the woman he'd spoken to snapped at him. "He's gone out the window!"

Once more, in his fight with the Dark Lord, nothing was making sense. Vader had once again spared him. But he didn't have time to dwell on that, as he decided instead to rush to the fallen Grand Master. Obi-Wan gently rolled the small being over onto his back, checking for a pulse. As he did so, green eyes opened, and he was relieved to see a ragged, but steady rise and fall of the small chest. "H-hurry," Yoda panted. "Not much time."

"Go," one of the other handmaidens urged gently. "We'll look after him."

Being a Jedi meant that you had to make hard decisions quickly and decisively. It was difficult, but it was not impossible. And so, knowing that his master would be safe and taken care of, Obi-Wan nodded and jumped out the window himself, rushing to find a transport that would take him to Senator Amidala, even while knowing he was going to be too late.

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Vader made a mad dash through the city on a speeder he'd taken from one of the troopers that had come to the palace after hearing of an attack. He knew he should have stayed and taken care of the Jedi, but he couldn't stand the thought of Padmé being taken away from him. That's what this was, surely, a diversion. The Jedi would have been sent to the palace to try and obtain and, more importantly, distract him, while others went to her home to steal her away. He couldn't even finish off his enemies knowing that Padmé was in danger.

His furious races through Coruscant were mere Sunday flights around the planet compared to what he was doing now. Vader was going at impossible speeds, doing pretty well everything that they warned you against doing while driving. But he had to get the Padmé. He had to make sure she was all right! His own safety meant nothing.

There was no sign of any of the trooper patrols he'd stationed in this quarter, he noticed, as he flew ever closer to his goal. They must have all gone to the palace after hearing about the attack, leaving few here to protect the actual prize. While Vader understood the logic and their reasoning, a part of him wanted to strangle them all. Were they so dull that they did not understand what was really important? He sorely hoped he wasn't too late.

Jumping off the speeder, ducking into a roll before he was one his feet again, the Sith didn't hesitate before running into the house, not even caring that his speeder had smashed into a stone house and caught fire. Without thought, he burst through the door. There were two strange men arguing with the senator. She appeared tired and annoyed with the apparently uninvited guests, while his trooper and commander stood beside her, looking suspicious.

They all jumped, however, the moment the door slammed into the wall, and turned to stare up at the Sith in fear. Not hesitating, Vader drew his lightsaber and cut both strangers in half, their shrieks of pain stopping just as quickly as they had started. But that didn't stop Padmé's own surprised scream.

"What are you doing?!" she cried in horror, even as CT-585 and Commander Piett drew their blasters, now on edge. "These men were from the palace and were bringing me a—"

"They are Rebels come to steal you away!" Vader roared, not realizing that his voice was shaking.

Padmé stared up at him in confused dismay while the rest of who he supposed were her family came rushing down the stairs in their night clothes. The moment they saw Vader, they gasped, all going different shades of pale. But there was no time for introductions or explanations. He had to get Padmé out of here, get to somewhere safe, somewhere where no one could take her from him, and it had to be now.

Stalking forward, causing the Nabberies to all cry out in different ways, the Sith grabbed Padmé by the wrist and dragged her towards the back door. "Wait! Stop!" she cried, fighting against him, though it was useless. "What are you doing? Stop!"

"Stay with the senator's family," he instructed the trooper and commander, ignoring the tiny woman's cries of protest. "Jedi are coming. I am taking the senator back to the ship."

“Yes, Sir!” the clone saluted, while the commander nodded, still looking a bit dazed. Piett was still young yet, but the Sith hoped he would grow out of it quickly. The boy could not afford to remain so innocent.

And so, smashing his way through the house, ignoring Padmé’s objections and her family’s screams, Vader managed to find his way to the back of the house and to their private speeder port where selected a fast looking ship. Without ceremony, he pushed Padmé in and jumped into the shuttle himself, taking off before anyone could stop him. As he forced the shuttle to leap into the sky, once he was above the city, the chaos, and he looked over at Padmé. Only then did Vader let some of the tension fall away.

She was safe. She was with him. And he wasn’t going to let anything happen to her.

Warning sirens began shrieking, forcing Vader to turn towards the view screen. The moment of peace had fled just as it had come, and even as he tried to contact the Star Destroyer overhead, Vader came to realize how far the Jedi’s plot really went. He had left one danger zone and had stupidly rushed into another. Just above the planet’s hemisphere, a fierce, chaotic naval battle was occurring, ships off all shapes and sizes whizzing about in whimsical looking patterns of death. It would be quite impossible to reach the Star Destroyer through this mess.

“Kriff,” Padmé breathed in terror, and Vader was forced to agree.



## 31. Part II: Into Oblivion

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Picking up Vader's trail was not hard. As Obi-Wan sped through the city on a speeder he'd been forced to 'borrow' from a young man near the palace, all he had to do was follow the trail of fear or annoyance of the people caused from having a loud bike rush through the streets some time earlier. Following this, as well as the whispers of the Force, Obi-Wan came to stop outside a house that's door had already been broken open. There was a speeder on fire not far away, too.

This must be it, he thought sarcastically as he jumped off his bike and ran into the house, 'saber drawn.

The moment he entered, blaster bolts were fired at him, and he could hear the screams of the inhabitants within. Deflecting the shots easily, Obi-Wan managed to send one back to the trooper. It hit true and knocked the clone off his feet with an agonized groan. The other, an Imperial officer he realized, he sent crashing backwards with a Force push. It worked perfectly and the officer hit his head hard against the far wall, knocking him out cold.

Looking up, the Jedi saw what must be the senator's family, as he saw Sola standing there with wide blue eyes, in her nightgown. "The senator?" he asked her breathlessly.

The others all stared at him in terror and apprehension, but Sola managed to come out of her shock to reply, "V-Vader took her away! To his ship!"

"Blast!" Obi-Wan cursed as he turned back around and ran out of the house to his speeder without another word to the still shocked Naberries. There was no time to explain.

Pushing the limits, he rushed back to the palace on the bike only to find it in a complete state of pandemonium. Storm Troopers were everywhere, royal guards too, as well as the civilian police trying to keep bystanders that had wandered out to see what was going on away. A fire had been started somehow where they had last been fighting, perhaps a distraction created after he was gone, and there were medics and fire speeders everywhere, sirens blazing. With all the attention so focused on that side of the palace, Obi-Wan managed to sneak into the hanger and take a ship. Something fast and maneuverable, as he sensed that there was something going on in the skies just as well as there was down on the earth.

And without anyone to stop him, he took off, out of the hanger, rushing up and away to the stars. It didn't take him long to figure out why the Force was sending him warning. From up above, the Rebels had engaged the Imperials in battle. All around there were dog fights occurring between the two sides, the Star Destroyer and the various other Rebel ships firing back and forth at one another. It was an absolute mess, the scene strongly reminiscent of the Clone Wars.

"What the hell are they doing?" he muttered. They weren't supposed to engage unless absolutely necessary! Quickly scanning his controls, Obi-Wan opened the communication lines to hear the transmissions going on around him, wanting to get an idea of what he was up against and what was going on.

“—ire. Repeat, this is Black One in the unmarked, civilian ship, do not fire!”

“Blast!” Obi-Wan cursed. Vader had taken the senator into this? Was he mad? Or perhaps he hadn’t counted on such a large Rebel attack?

In all honesty, when the Jedi and Bail had been planning this, Obi-Wan had not counted on such a large scale attack. Bail had told him it would be a small operation only to come when called if things got out of hand. Apparently the higher-ups in Rebel Command had thought differently. Apparently they’d been listening in the whole time to the mission and sent reinforcements when they realized the rescue was failing.

Opening his line, Obi-Wan followed Vader’s suit and began his own distress signal. “Rebel Fleet, this is Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi in Naboo fighter 77-T19, do you read me? Do not hit unmarked, civilian ship. Senator Amidala is on board. Do you read? Senator Amidala is in that ship!”

“Knight Kenobi, this is Blue Two, we read you, over,” one of the many Rebel ships responded. Anyone would be hard pressed to pick out which one it was, however.

Knowing at least that no one would now directly engage the other craft in direct conflict set the Jedi’s nerves at rest. But only for a moment before he realized that the ship which contained not only the senator, but the Sith as well, was swiftly being fought over by swarms of fighters. The dog fights got dangerously close to the civilian ship that did not appear to have any weapons of its own and limited shielding. One stray hit and the entire thing would be destroyed, the inhabitation along with it.

Obi-Wan’s heart jumped into his throat at the thought and he quickly steered his ship close to the civilian vessel that was doing maneuvers that it surely was not made to withstand. It was terrifying to watch the awkward looking ship duck and weave and speed through the battle all around it. It was a miracle that the thing didn’t fly apart just from the sheer speed in which the Sith was forcing it. But somehow, truly a blessing from the Force, the thing was staying together and neatly dodging all blasts coming its way.

Had it not been a live and death situation, and had some much not been on the line, the young Jedi might have found himself admiring the skills of the Sith more than he was at the moment. It was... well, nothing short of amazing. He had never seen anyone fly like that before, not even at the Jedi Temple. The things Vader was doing with that ship should not have been possible. It was as though the dark creature were actually forcing the laws of physics to bend to his will, as though no scientific law applied to him. The way the ship was going, its graceful evades and easy spins made it looked more like a bizarre sky ballet in the stars instead of the death race it really was.

But as it was, there was no time to admire any sort of talent. Right now there was a battle raging all around him, and Obi-Wan knew he had to focus. One wrong move and he was done for. So, taking a deep breath, he threw himself into the moment, hoping that somehow, they would all get out of this alive.

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In the ship that had come for the Naberrie family, Darth Vader was cursing steadily under his breath. He had expected some ill-thought through attack from the Rebels, but he never

expected a full-out assault! This was not expected or logical. Why in the seven layers of Sith hell were they attacking so boldly like this? Surely this couldn't all be because of Padmé?

Sparing a glance at the woman beside him, it was easy to see that she was not the least bit more confident about the situation than he was or any less surprised. From the time he'd taken her from her family until now, the small woman had seemed to remain in a traumatized shock. He could sense through their link that she was exhausted, and coupled with the sudden burst of adrenaline at being thrown in the middle of a battle, she was not doing well. The fact that he had to duck and weave and spin around probably didn't help the illness he felt coming from her either.

But there was no time to think about her comfort on this flight. Right now all that matter was getting her to the Star Destroyer, to save her life! He could help her later with the nausea, but he couldn't do that if they were dead.

"Look out!" she shouted, causing the Sith to retreat from his straying thoughts.

Coming back to himself and the battle that was raging around him, Vader quickly ducked out of the way of the wreckage of a flaming ship. They got a glimpse of the burning body of a dead Rebel pilot just inside. He felt the senator's panic and increase of nausea, but he couldn't do much about it. He couldn't take his mind away from the situation anymore to comfort her. Now was just not the time.

"Victory, this is Black One, do you read?" he tried the com again, falling back to using his code name.

"This is Admiral Resle, Black One, we read you."

"You need to send more fighters out here to cover me. I have no weapons."

He had to turn sharply to avoid another volley of fires, Padmé letting out just the smallest whimper as she closed her eyes tightly, clinging to her seat. That had been very close. "Black One," the admiral came back in through a static connection. "There are no more available fighters. They have all been deployed to—"

"You will send more to cover me, or I will kill you before I enter the hanger!" he snarled, allowing a generous amount of Force suggestion to coat his words in his panic to get out of the danger zone.

The line rang out in static before it was cut completely. Just above them, Vader was disheartened to see a mild explosion to the side of the Victory. He wasn't even sure if his last message had gotten through. It seemed very likely that he was going to have to remain on his own right now. There would be no one to help him get to the Star Destroyer.

"Kriff," he hissed, his analytic mind working to solve the problem he now found himself. There seemed to be no clear answer. For the first time in his life, the Force seemed to close off on him. He wasn't sure what to do.

The flash of yellow caught the Sith's eye and he saw a Naboo fighter spinning and firing all around him, taking out ships that were coming too close. In the back of his mind, Vader realized that it had come up from the planet's surface and had been trailing him for most of the fight until it had been able to break away from engaging others in order to come beside him. It was firing all around them, taking out Imperial fighters. From within, he could read a

clear, bright Force signature. It was the Jedi, the one that he'd face twice now. Kenobi. He was protecting the Sith's ship.

It was a cruel irony. His enemy was working and risking his life to protect him and Vader would have to remain dependent. It couldn't be helped, however. The Jedi obviously wanted the senator alive just as badly as he did, and for the time being Vader knew he would have to use this to his advantage. His request for cover had obviously not gone through to his allies, his distress calls had gotten lost in the fray. Everyone was now firing too close to him now, seeming to have forgotten that the message earlier had been not to fire at the unmarked ship.

So, making a decision that he was sure he'd regret in some way, Vader swiveled the ship around and hugged close to the Naboo fighter. The Jedi's surprise was clear through the Force, but the Sith ignored it. "Naboo Fighter, this is Black One," he commed the Jedi. "Do you read?"

There was a long pause on the other line even as Padmé was staring at him in open shock. He didn't look at her, though. Let her think what she wanted. Vader was going to protect her no matter what it took. Even if it meant working with the enemy.

"Black One, this is Naboo fighter," the Jedi's voice filled the cockpit.

"I will stay under you," Vader went on, not wasting time with explanations or any such nonsense. "Cover me."

"Copy that," came the instant reply, followed by a rather timid, "Is the senator all right?" after a pause.

"I-I'm fine," Padmé responded, picking up a headset.

There came a much more relieved, "Copy that," from the Jedi, and together the two ships flew through the fight.

It immediately became clear that there was a problem with this plan, however. Vader realized that the Jedi was steering them towards one of the large Rebel bulk cruisers, away from the Star Destroyer. The Rebel ship was quite a bit closer, there was no denying that, and the sooner they got out of the line of fire the better.

But Vader couldn't do it.

Growling, he turned his ship sharply, catching the Jedi off guard, and headed for the Star Destroyer. "What are you doing?" the Jedi's incredulous question filled the ship.

Ignoring the cry, the Sith kept his course charging towards the Imperial line, even as the Jedi was forced to turn about sharply to catch up. Padmé was once more staring at him with wide eyes. She was even shaking, but he wasn't sure if it was solely from fright or if she was also cold. She was in nothing but a light nightgown, after all, and slippers, her robe not thick enough to keep the chill of space away. He found himself wishing he could do something to warm her.

The Jedi managed to come back into position, and once he shot away a charging fighter, he tried again to contact the Sith. "We need to get you out of fire!" Kenobi cried. "The bulk cruiser is closer, follow me!"

"I can't!" Vader snapped in frustration, suddenly aware that while being covered by the Naboo fighter, it would give the Imperial fighters that idea that he was an enemy. Punching in an Imperial cryptogram, he sent the coded message to all nearby Imperial ships, hoping that they would see it and understand that he was not a threat. But with the way things were going for him lately, he wasn't counting on it.

"I can't get you close to the Star Destroyer!" the Jedi exclaimed. "It's too dangerous, for both of us! We need to get to the bulk cruiser!"

There was a very great decision to make here. The safest option would be to follow the Jedi to the Rebel ship. Not only would they be out of the fire fight, but Padmé would then be safe, because he was certain that the Rebels would leave once they had their prize. But then he would be a prisoner of his enemies. Not only that, but Padmé would be taken away from him. He wouldn't be able to watch her anymore, to protect her. Even when he escaped—and he knew they wouldn't be able to hold him—it was doubtful he'd be able to get away with Padmé, not without slaughtering everyone in his path. Padmé would be appalled if that happened, she wouldn't want him near if he killed all of her friends.

It would be a lose-lose situation if he went with the Rebels. But at the moment, getting to the Imperials was little better. Until he entered the ship, most of them would view him as an threat since the Naboo fighter was covering him. And still, it would crush Padmé to have to watch from an enemy ship as her friends were destroyed.

But that was the best option. It was the only way that he could keep her completely safe, keep her with him. He reached out to the Force for guidance, but was offered none. The war that had been slowly tearing him apart earlier was now completely silent, as if waiting to see the outcome of this battle before resuming its own fight or allowing him to hear counsel.

His silence, however, ultimately made the decision for him as the Jedi misinterpreted the indecision for stubborn silence. "Right." A sigh. "I'll cover you until we get close. From there you'll have to be on your own."

"Copy that," Vader answered automatically, silently amazed that the Jedi was willing to give up his prize. Apparently Kenobi was willing to let Senator Amidala go to the enemy and live rather than chance her getting blow up. Could it be, too, that the Jedi realized that she was truly safe with Vader? Did he sense that Vader would sooner throw himself out into space than hurt her? For reasons not completely understood to the Sith he hoped it was so. He wanted everyone to know that he would never hurt Padmé.

The mad dash towards the Star Destroyer was nothing short of frantic. But even with that being the case, Vader couldn't help be impressed with the Jedi that flew with him as a wing man of sorts. This man's skills at the helm were impressive. It wasn't even just that the man's Force reflexes were good, it was something else, something that puzzled the Sith. Despite not knowing the Jedi, certainly never flying with him before, as they made their way closer to the Star Destroyer, their movements were quite... complimentary. It was almost as though they had choreographed their flight pattern together. He'd never flown so synchronized with anyone.

Surely no one would ever believe that a Sith and a Jedi could work so well together, for a common goal. While Kenobi did all the shooting, Vader was not lax and made sure that he control their movements, making sure the Jedi dodged when he dodged, spun when he spun.

In a bizarre way, they were a team. Vader had never been part of a team like this before, where he was just as much follower as he was leader.

Everything was going according to plan, when the Force screamed out. On instinct, Vader tried to turn away, but was not fast enough. There had been fire coming in from both sides, and he could not get out of the way without running into the Naboo fighter. So, making a decision, he avoided one but the other bolt hit them in the back. The little ship's alarms blared in fright and the warning signals flashed in protest. What limited amount of shielding they had had was now virtually gone. One more hit and they were done for.

"Are you okay, Black One?" the Jedi's concerned sounded oddly genuine.

"We cannot take another hit," Vader replied bluntly. There was no use sugarcoating the truth.

"Roger that, stay close."

They were just about to cross the invisible barrier into the Imperial line, when a stream of fire came directly at them, effectively splitting the pair apart. Looking about wildly, Vader traced the fire back to a Rebel ship. Thus far in the battle, neither the Imperials nor Rebels had shot directly at him, both sides knowing that Darth Vader and Senator Amidala were aboard the ship. But now, he got the very bad feeling that the objective of this battle had once again changed.

"Rebel cruiser, this is Jedi Knight Kenobi," the Jedi's cried distress signal went out along all open frequencies. "Cease fire on the unmarked ship! Repeat, cease fire! Senator Amidala is on board."

But there was no answer to the Jedi's desperate pleas. A sickening realization dawned on Vader as he turned to look at the woman beside him, who was deathly pale. She turned to stare at him as well, and he knew that she understood. They were not going to make it out of this.

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Frantic, Obi-Wan tried again to send out his distress call. "Rebel Fleet, this is Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi. Cease fire! Senator Amidala is—"

"Knight Kenobi, this is commander of the bulk cruiser Freedom," a reply came at last on a private channel. "The mission directive has changed. Repeat, the mission directive has changed. All are ordered to attack unmarked ship."

The color drained from the young man's face. "W-what?" he gasped. "But Senator Amidala—!"

"Will have to be an acceptable loss."

The line was cut. Comprehension hit the Jedi like a ton of bricks to the face. The Rebels had wanted to help with a rescue mission, had wanted to make a blow to the Empire. Now was their chance. They had waited to see if the senator could be saved and they now deemed that she could not. Now they were turning their attention to the other inhabitant of the civilian ship. They were after Vader.

“No,” he whispered in horror. “N-no! Freedom Commander, you cannot attack civilian ship! Do you read me? Do not attack!”

There was no answer.

The galaxy had truly become out of balance. All of the Jedi teachings about preserving life didn’t apply here. It didn’t seem to apply anywhere anymore. The mission had originally been about rescuing a Rebel that had virtually gotten left behind, now it was about throwing that person’s life away in an attempt to kill someone else. What had the galaxy come to? What madness had supposed civilization fallen into?

Now too far away and forced to defend himself, Obi-Wan was made to watch helplessly as the little civilian vessel came into constant attack from those who were supposed to be an ally. And there was nothing he could do about it.

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Difficult situations were nothing new to Darth Vader, but he was hard pressed at the moment to think of a time when he’d been in such a mess. There appeared to be no way out of this. Their chances of escape had been small before when just trying to avoid the fire, but now that they were being directly pursued... they didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell.

Frantically looking about the controls, hoping that he had missed some sort of weapon’s system, Vader found his breathing had accelerated. He was scared. Not just scared, terrified, nervous, overwhelmed. Everything a Sith Lord should not be, especially at a time like this. Again he reached out to the Force, but it once more mocked him with its stubborn silence. He would get no guidance.

All was not completely lost, he realized, as there was an escape pod jettison button on the panel. A ship this small usually did not have an escape pod, and before he’d been too focused on staying alive and unharmed that he hadn’t notice it. But now there was a small ray of hope. If the rebels were truly as noble and moral as they claimed to be, then they would abide by the Galactic Code of War and would not shoot down the pod. If he could jettison Padmé out, she would be safe and eventually get picked up and taken to safety.

Or would she? There was no doubt that should the Rebels obtain her, they would welcome her back into their folds with once her stay with him had been discussed and settled. There would be no need to worry about her. But if she got picked up by Imperials... Vader didn’t know what his master still wanted with her, and there was a great, terrifying possibility that once he was gone, his master would have the senator tortured and executed. He could not let that happen! Which meant that if he jettisoned her, he would have to go too to be completely certain she was safe. But then if they were picked up by the Rebels, he would be a prisoner...

Vader felt something snap inside of him. This was too hard! He couldn’t figure out how to win in any of these situations! If he did one thing, he risked himself and possibly Padmé, if he did the other, he risked Padmé completely. There was no winning, and Vader hated losing.

There was only one answer to this, and it was not something that Vader liked to think about. In this situation, it was all or nothing. Either they came out of this together or not at all. It was a grim prospect, but there wasn’t much he could do about that now. At least if they died here, Padmé’s death would be quick.

The ship was nicked by a bolt, and it took all of Vader's skill to keep it on course and not spinning out of control. It did, however, knock him around enough that he was thrown forward into the control panel, smashing his face into it. Sparks flew from the damage the helmet had caused, while Padmé's surprised scream sounded over the blare of alarms.

Almost instantly, the Sith was sitting up again, knowing that he could not afford to lose concentration. If he did, they were dead. Vaguely, he realized that one of the lenses in his helmet had been shattered, leaving one eye exposed. The purified air escaped through the hole, causing the respirator to produce eerie hisses as the vacuum of the suit had been breached.

"Are you okay?!" Padmé's concern washed over him through their link, but there was no time to dwell upon it, or the warmth that spread through his chest at knowing she actually cared.

"Get into the escape pod," he ordered just as he narrowly missed another barrage of Rebel fire.

"W-what?" the senator questioned.

"Get into the escape pod," he snapped, loosely comprehending that the fight had carried them far from the orbit of Naboo. It would not be good to jettison the pod if there was no one near to pick it up soon. But then, there was no choice now.

Even while the ship was a blur of motion, Padmé remained still in her seat. "I'm not leaving you!"

Losing his temper from the stress of the situation, the Sith finally lost it and turned to bark out harshly, "GO!" sending a wave of Force suggestion to the woman.

That did the trick. Standing up with a horrified expression on her ashen face, Padmé quickly stumbled to the back of the ship and into the relative safety of the pod. This would be cutting it very close.

But then, a glimmer of hope washed over the Sith, the Darkness was responding to him. Twelve Imperial fighters were now attacking the Rebels who were fire at him. He might not have to risk jettisoning the escape pod after all. If the fighters could just keep up their protection, there might be a window of escape for him. The Jedi's ship, too, came into view, and once again, the Sith knew he had an ally.

Just as he began sinking into the warm familiarity of the Dark Side, before throwing his faith in it completely for its support, time slowed down to a stop. For a moment, Vader didn't understand what was happening, his mind so tired and foggy from stress, but the answer soon came to him as the galaxy stopped moving. It was a Force vision.

He had had a few of these before battle, some in battle too, always there to help him make the best decisions possible. It was why his record stood as undefeated. This time, however, the answer was not as clear as it usually was. It was not as simple as just making a different move. There was yet one final decision to make. And this time, he would have to live with the consequences. Forever.

Several shots would be fire simultaneously at the ship. No matter what he did, the ship would be hit. The first vision told him to remain where he was, to dodge the fires, and come



out relatively unscathed. The back of the ship would be hit, but the emergency force fields would come up, and he would then have gone far enough into Imperial territory that he would be safe. An emergency vehicle had maneuvered itself to come and rescue him, if he just pushed it a little further.

But he couldn't do this. Padmé was now in the back, in the escape pod. There would not be enough time to jettison the pod into a safe location or have her come back up here with him. She would be killed.

The second alternative was that he stay in his current flight path for as long as he could before joining her in the back. It was unclear as to whether or not they would survive if he jettisoned the pod. Either way, they either both lived or died. He received no more answer, except that they would be together.

Time started to speed back up into reality, and a verdict had to be made. The war raging within him came back to life in that moment, fighting over the choice. The Darkness urged him to save himself. He could always extract his revenge when he was back on board his ship. He could kill them all, destroy everything, drown his sorrow in blood and rule the galaxy as the Emperor soon enough.

But he couldn't live without Padmé.

Using the Force to move at impossible speeds, Vader sprinted to the back, to the escape pod, sealing it and hitting the jettison button faster than a blink of an eye. He took Padmé in his arms, shielded her completely, even as the pod shook with the blast that hit them. The last thing Vader remembered was hugging Padmé tightly, giving himself up completely to the Force.

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The fight around the civilian ship was growing in intensity. It was getting pretty close, and Obi-Wan knew that this couldn't last much longer. Blasts from everywhere were getting closer and closer to Vader and the senator. He knew he would be unable to help them now.

A strange shimmer in the Force sent Obi-Wan's stomach rolling with dread. Just then, he watched with wide eyes was the ship that harbored the senator and the Sith was blown up, sending a shock-wave throughout the Force. His heart stopped.

It took a moment for the Knight to comprehend what had happened. Both Rebel and Imperial ships pulled back, away from the explosion, even as Obi-Wan raced away from them all. Gone. They were gone. There was nothing left. The Darkness that had surrounded everything, nearly the entire galaxy, lifted. It was gone. All gone.

Darth Vader was dead, and Senator Amidala with him.

## 32. News

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It was all over the news. Everywhere the Emperor looked, footage from the Battle Over Naboo was playing on the newsfeeds. He couldn't believe it, even after hearing about it several hours ago, he still could not believe it. His apprentice was dead.

The night before had been peaceful enough. Sidious had been mediating, troubled by the waves he was sensing from the Dark Side of the Force. There was something happening within the Force, something strange and complex. Despite not being sure of the origins, he believed it partially had to do with his apprentice. Vader had been behaving strangely the past several months, ever since Senator Amidala had been introduced to his care, but it had been nothing to be too alarmed about. He'd monitored the younger Sith, had punished him into submission. Everything was normal.

Except that the strange tremors in the Force did not subside. He did not know where they were coming from, but he understood that they spoke danger for him. The Light was fighting back.

As preposterous as it sounded, the Light Side of the Force was beginning to fight back. After three years of nothing by Darkness, the Light was slowly working its way back into the universe. At first, it was laughable, understandable. The natural order of the galaxy was to be balanced, and with the Darkness covering everything, it made sense that there would be a little Light working to counterbalance. But it had been growing.

The strongest Sidious had felt it was several nights before he'd ordered Vader to take the senator back to Naboo. It was curious and he'd tortured his apprentice before and after, questioning him on the nature of the Light. Vader had known nothing, nor did he when he left. With the younger Sith gone, away from Coruscant, the Light didn't leave, either. It continued to grow stronger little by little.

But the early morning of the Battle Over Naboo, the Light had exploded, blinding the Sith Lord, causing him physical pain. After the initial blast, he realized that the suffocating Darkness that had surrounded the galaxy had been all but lifted. There was no Darkness, there was no Light. There was nothing by a grey medium of nothingness. That was how he knew the truth of the matter. That is how he knew that his apprentice, Darth Vader, was dead.

Of any Force sensitives he'd come across, whether Jedi or Sith, Vader had been the strongest Sidious had ever encountered. In fact, he'd put stock into believing that the boy had been the foretold great Sith Lord of the old prophecies. Indeed, he'd had visions of a creature in black that would rule the galaxy with an iron fist. Of course he'd had to alter that prophecy by keeping such a demon on a tight leash and under his foot.

No matter how much he thought about it, the situation never got any clearer. How? How was it possible that Vader just... died? The boy had been strong, abnormally so. Out of curiosity he'd once measured the boy's midichlorian count. The readings had been off the chart. In fact, the machine he'd been using to test had exploded. All Sidious knew for certain

was that the count was well over twenty thousand. Not even his former master had had a count as high. No Sith or Jedi had.

From an early age, Vader had proven to be exceptional. Already at the age of four he could build a speeder and easily repair anything mechanical. The boy had always shown that he could see things before they happened and could react faster than the human eye could see. The more he had watched and trained the boy, the more he found the child could do. The only flaw, as far as Sidious was concerned, was the inherent goodness that the boy harbored. It had taken quite some time to break Vader's spirit, to conjure up true hatred. Fear had been easy, guilt had been simple, but it was the hatred which made Vader strong, strong enough to kill thousands, strong enough to slay the entire Jedi Order!

He had forged a god among mortals, a terror so powerful that nothing could stop it. Vader had been his battering ram in the galaxy, tearing down the walls of the Old Republic so that he could build a new Empire. There had been nothing to stop him in his quest to control the universe. There had been no signs of slowing down or stalling.

But then a mere ship explosion had killed Darth Vader. Something as trivial as an explosion had taken out the younger Sith. Many people died in such a way, but the mighty Lord Vader? It was almost a mockery. The Jedi couldn't kill him, Rebel factions on warring planets couldn't kill him, but one lucky shot by an insignificant enemy had taken him out? It just could not be possible.

Stalking away from the throne, Sidious went once more to view what footage there was of the battle for the hundredth time. The admiral of the Victory had had an insubordinate piece together footage from various dash cams from the fighters, and had sent it to him almost as soon as the Emperor had sent out messages concerning the disaster. The first view was of the civilian ship that Vader had unfortunately found himself piloting. Of course there was footage of his apprentice's nature defying stunts while in space. Had it not been a battle, the elder Sith might have accused his apprentice of showing off. But as it was, Vader appeared to be doing everything in his power to keep out of anyone's way and get to the Star Destroyer.

The next few seconds were of the battle away from Vader, but soon enough Sidious saw a bright yellow ship flying all around the civilian vessel. With just the slightest glance, he could tell it was a Jedi. It had confused him at first as to why the Jedi would help Vader, but then he remembered that Senator Amidala had been on board as well. It all made sense. Apparently Vader had no weapons, or he was certain the boy would have shot down the infernal Jedi. But as it was, the two Naboo ships were forced to work together. Had Vader still been alive, Sidious would have punished his apprentice for what looked like collaboration. But in all reality, the Sith Master knew that his apprentice had only been acting on the most logical option open to him.

From one cam, he watched again as the little civilian ship was hit, taking out much of the shielding. It was testament to his apprentice's skill that the ship hadn't gone careening away and into the path of other fire, but Sidious had come to expect nothing less from Vader. The boy excelled in flying, and it showed. Any of his lesser apprentices would have ultimately succumbed to the blasts by now.

At last, however, it came to the point that Sidious wanted, the part that he had watched over and over again to try and make sense of it. The ship was still careening through the

chaos at incredible speed, there was fire from all around, and then...! And then the ship blew.

Narrowing yellow eyes, the Sith Lord paused the tape and stared at the blast. It was bright and pieces of debris flew in every which direction, if there were any pieces left at all. There was no sign of anything left.

Nothing.

Continuing on in the feed, he watched the remainder of the explosion. The only actual dialogue that had been left in was of one pilot's reaction to what he'd just see: "Force..."

Indeed. The moment the explosion had occurred Sidious had felt the explosion in the Force as well. There was no longer the iron clamp of the Dark Side in the galaxy. He knew Vader's Force presence was significant, but not to this extent. It had hurt when the boy had died. It was equal, the surge in the Force, to when the Jedi had all been destroyed by Order 66. Everything had once again been thrown out of balance, the balance that Sidious had been trying to create. The galaxy was now in a strange state of ambiguity.

Motioning to a guard, Sidious went back to his throne to sit. The guard nodded and opened the door, leading in a rather terrified looking admiral. The fear was not even enough to bring a cruel smile to the Sith's lips. He just wasn't in the mood, and everyone knew that. When news had reached him to confirm Vader's death, Sidious had taken his anger out on the messenger. As well as several servants and five guards. He'd dismissed everyone so that he didn't end up making a mistake and killing someone half-way valuable afterwards.

Now that he'd had a few hours to think, to digest what had happened, he wanted to plan for his revenge. "Come in, Admiral," he invited. "We have very grave issues to discuss."

The admiral, Sidious didn't even know his name, knelt down before the Emperor in the humblest way imaginable. It soothed a small part of the Sith's ego, but not enough. He was still furious, though it was hidden underneath the relatively calm exterior. His eyes, however, were glowing hot, deep molten yellow from barely repressed anger.

"Your highness," the admiral mumbled in respectful greeting.

"Rise," the Sith commanded shortly. "Tell me, Admiral, what you can about the Rebel attack?"

Standing completely straight, avoiding direct eye contact, the middle aged man replied measurably, "From what can be gathered from the reports streaming in, the attack appeared rather spontaneous. Apparently it was all an attempt to recapture Senator Amidala."

Sidious scowled blackly. "Well, they did a fine job of it," he spat sarcastically. He still could not believe that the Rebels took the shot. In the past, they had always been so weak, so moral, he wouldn't have counted on them sacrificing the senator, even if, to him, it was the most obvious thing to do. But this gave him a platform in which to further denounce them to the general public, he'd come to recognize. It was easy to demonize them, after all, if they did most of the work.

The admiral swallowed thickly, nodding his head. "Y-yes your highness," he agreed readily before continuing his report. 'In their attempt to capture her, they sent two Jedi to the palace. Apparently, Lord Vader changed plans when arriving on Naboo and sent the senator to

stay with her family, using a decoy at the palace.’ Sidious nodded, expecting nothing less of his former apprentice’s slyness. “According to reports, he killed one Jedi, the other got away.”

Sidious’s mood darkened further. “The one that flew in the space battle.”

“Yes, m-my lord,” the admiral was shaking now. “Sources say that Lord Vader went after the senator before the Jedi could obtain her, and in his absence, Rebels set fire to the palace. Interviews from the officer stationed with the senator said that Lord Vader was able to get away with her. Minutes later, the Jedi came and attacked them. The officer was knocked unconscious and a trooper shot. From there, you were sent the recorded images.”

Unexpected. It was all completely unexpected. The Rebels were learning, becoming bolder in their anarchy. The Force had been strangely silent to him for some time regarding visions of the future. Sidious had assumed it had been because there was nothing amiss. But he should have known. He should have known the Rebels were adapting to the callousness of this feud when they’d sent an assassin after Senator Amidala. That had been out of character, just as this all-out assault upon the Empire from Naboo.

Boiling with rage from his lack of insight, from his failure to forewarn Vader, and for his apprentice’s death, the air around the Sith turn inky black, thick as tar, and he knew that the admiral, as well as some of his guards, were terrified. Not even their fear could calm the wrath brewing in him. How dare those pathetic, insignificant wretches defy him!

“Admiral,” he began with deadly calm, folding his hands and steeping his fingers. “The attack upon the Empire and the death of Lord Vader cannot go unpunished. I want you to form a team and gather the greatest admirals and generals to devise a plan to eradicate the Rebels.”

“Sire?”

“I don’t care how it’s done, Admiral,” Sidious went on, fall farther and farther into hate. “I want them all destroyed. I don’t care the cost, these Rebels must be found and dealt with swiftly. They cannot be allowed to believe they have gotten away with defying me.”

The Emperor’s unnatural, deep voice rang out through the Throne Room, echoing. The admiral remained still for several moments before nodding his head in humility and fear. “Y-yes, your highness, it will be done... only...”

“Only?” Sidious snarled, just barely able to control himself from killing this man.

“O-o-only the R-Rebels disappeared without a t-trace after their attack,” the admiral stuttered slightly. “It will take time to find them.”

“I don’t care about your pathetic excuses!” the Emperor shrieked, the room darkening further, drowning the officer in hate. “Do whatever it takes, but I want them found. Conduct interrogations, torture anyone who are suspected of having connections. These Rebels must be found!”

“Yes, your highness!”

“Now,” he growled low in his throat. “Get out of my sight,” he waved his hand dismissively, disgust dripping from his voice.

The admiral didn't even bother to respond. So with only a low bow, the man all by ran from the room and was out in the hall in a matter of seconds. Even the guard, knowing that his life could very well be on the line, stepped outside the door to stand guard rather than stay in to view the Emperor. It left Sidious completely alone. Just as well.

Now alone with his anger, all he could do was plot and perhaps see if the Force could give him any insight to this perplexing situation. It was curious, once the navy and army staff came up with their battle plans, he would have to look over it. While he normally did this, usually the plans went to Vader to look over so the boy could further critique them before anything came to him. Then all he would have to do was either give the 'yes or 'no.' Now he knew he would probably have to go back to sitting down and actually discussing the plan with all of the lesser beings. He hadn't been a part of such trivial developments over war for a while. That had always been his apprentices' jobs.

But at the moment, he had to think about the funeral. While he was still furious about the death of his apprentice, he could not let this opportunity go to waste. Something huge and grandiose needed to be planned for Vader's funeral. Senator Amidala's too. They were both big public figures, and Vader was supposed to be like a son to him, after all. Everyone expected that sort of relationship before the Emperor and his heir. And Amidala had been a protégé to him in the past.

This could be just what he needed to seal unity within the Empire. There had been so many problems rising up lately, after the initial shock of there actually being an Empire, and recently public opinion had been spotty. But this, this was just what he had needed. There was nothing more devastating to people than innocent death. The death of their future leader, the death of one of their beloved senators, it would stir up the people so badly, they would be begging him to go after the Rebels to finish them off. They would be begging him to go to war.

If only this sort of unity could have been achieved without the loss of Vader. He'd always planned to kill Senator Amidala in a staged accident, blaming the Rebels, but now they had done the job for him. And had taken out Vader too.

A large funeral this would be. He would, of course, have to put on a show, write a heartfelt speech about the loss of both beings. Of course on the day of the funeral, he'd have to shut down most of Coruscant to impact upon the people the seriousness of what had occurred. And of course, he'd have to get ready to speak to the press very soon, to clear up and set straight the news leaks from Naboo that were already blaring through stations around the galaxy.

But for now, he would mediate. Now he would slip into the Darkness and see what the future held, what the Force dictated for him to do. Because he would get his revenge, and he would not rest until every single Rebel was dead.

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When Cory woke up, he found himself lying on his back in some sort of bed. He tried to sit up, but groaned at the white-hot pain that shot through his shoulder and upper part of his chest. It took several minutes for him to recover from the unexpected pain, but the next time he opened his eyes, he found himself looking into concerned brown eyes.

"Easy, trooper," Piett muttered, placing a cool hand on his good shoulder.

“Wha—?”

“You’ve been shot.”

The trooper’s brows furrowed as he tried to remember what had happened or how this came to be. It took him a moment, but when it hit him, he turned a horrified face towards his companion. “The Jedi?”

“Got away,” the commander sighed, rubbing his hands over his face.

“How?” Cory demanded, extremely upset and disappointed in himself. He’d trained his whole life, had been bred and designed to stop enemies of the Empire, but he couldn’t stop one Jedi that just happened to run in for a moment. Disgraceful.

“Well,” Piett drawled, “after he deflected the shots you fired back, one obviously hitting you, he used the Force to throw me across the room and crashing into the far wall. After that, I presume he just walked out.”

“No reason to get smart,” the clone muttered, before letting out a tired breath. “Lord Vader’s going to kill us for letting that one get away. He said th—”

Cory trailed off when he noticed his companion’s sudden sallow face. Usually troopers stuck with troopers, but slowly Cory was broadening his scope of people he cared about. He had added Senator Amidala rather quickly, followed by Lieutenant Pilor, and now, there was Piett. He’d gotten to know the commander quite well since his promotion, having to work with him closely. So, despite his own wound, seeing the officer he tentatively considered a friend suddenly looking so unwell worried him.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded.

Piett looked at him with wide, almost disbelieving eyes, before he turned away, staring out at a point just over Cory, refusing to make eye contact again. “I... I don’t think we have to worry about Lord Vader punishing us anymore,” he said so quietly, CT-585 had to strain his ears.

“What? Why?” he asked. “Did he get the Jedi after we were attacked?”

The commander remained silent, face now blank. It only added to the trooper’s concern. This was not normally like Piett. While the man was hopelessly awkward around civilian types, when it came to talking about work, he was nothing short of professional. He did not shy away from the truth, even hard truths. When the boy hesitated it was time to get worried.

“Commander?”

The young man took a deep breath before he turned to stare at his friend, a strange sort of sadness outlining his features even as he tried to hide it. “We’re on a direct transport back to Coruscant,” he replied slowly. “On the fastest ship that could be made available. We should arrive in a few days just in time for...” he trailed off, taking another deep breath. “...before the funeral.”

Something cold wrapped itself around Cory’s spine, and he could only stare at the other man in dread. “Funeral?” he ventured a question, though he wasn’t sure if he really wanted an answer.

Another heavy sigh escaped Piett, and the boy reminded CT-585 of a much older man, one that had seen great disasters. “CT-585... Cory...” brown eyes were guilt-ridden and mournful. “After Lord Vader and Senator Amidala left, they ended up running into a space battle just in orbit around Naboo. The ship that they had taken had no weapons and little shielding.”

The trooper’s face drained of any color he’d had as understanding gradually dawned upon him. “They... didn’t make it?”

“No,” the commander replied stiffly. “The Rebels were trying to get Senator Amidala. But when they realized they couldn’t, and that they had a chance to get Lord Vader—”

“They got Lord Vader,” Cory finished with a growl.

“And Senator Amidala,” Piett shook his head sadly.

Rage boiled within the trooper, and had he been able to, he would have stormed to the cockpit and demanded the captain turn them around so that he could go and kill all of the Rebels himself. How? How could this be? How could Lord Vader be dead? He was invincible! There wasn’t a better pilot anywhere in the galaxy! There was just no way that the Sith Lord could really be gone!

And Senator Amidala...

When Cory thought about Padmé, his heart ached. She’d been one of the first real friends he’d ever had. It wasn’t like his bond with his brothers, they were close, his family. The senator was different, she had been a friend. A real friend. She wasn’t like other people who looked down upon clones or thought clones were an abomination to society and weren’t real humans. She’d treated him the same as she did everybody else, maybe even a little bit better. She smiled at him, looked him in the eyes when speaking, joked, laughed, and most importantly, had given him a name, not a designation number. And now, suddenly she was gone...

“What’s being done to avenge them?” he asked, his throat feeling tight.

“I don’t know,” Piett sighed. “I was not informed about any of that. But I suspect we’ll find out once we get to Coruscant.”

“And the senator’s family?” Cory thought of the nice people that had allowed him to stay in their house, who had also treated him like a real person. Jobal came instantly to mind, and he just knew she would be broken to learn of her youngest daughter’s death. Such a nice woman, such a nice family, and now their happiness would be destroyed.

“I wasn’t there when they found out. Actually, I hadn’t known about it either by the time I woke up and had gotten you out. I had to leave because of the distress calls coming from the palace.”

“The palace?” the trooper tried to sit up again, wincing and nearly falling back, but Piett was there, helping him and giving him more pillows to lean back on. Cory nodded his thanks. “What happened to the palace?”

“Apparently, before the Jedi came to try and get the senator from us, he set fire to part of the palace,” the boy rubbed his face again. ‘Apparently a good portion had been burned out.



By the time I got there, everything was under control, but ships were being sent up to help in the battle overhead. I had volunteered to go up,' he turned away, looking ashamed again, "but they wouldn't let me. Head injury," he explained at Cory's confused look.

It was only really then that CT-585 realized that there was indeed a large bandage on the back of his friend's head. "What happened?"

"The Jedi threw me pretty hard," Piett shook his head in disgust. "And the Nabberies wall was apparently stone."

The trooper winced in sympathy as they fell back into silence. Everything was going to be so different now...

Lowering his voice, he asked, "What do we do now? About Lord Vader's... plans and all?"

Piett suddenly stiffened and recomposed his features to that of a commander. It slightly surprised the trooper, who had watched the boy struggle to gracefully adorn his new position with only mild success before. "Nothing," he said sternly. "There's nothing we can do for the time being except stay absolutely quiet. The plans never existed. They were never thought. Try anything and you're on your own, but there's little good in them now since Lord Vader's... gone."

Cory was nodding along, but waited respectfully for the officer to finish. "I figured as much, but... well, they're bound to notice something's up with me."

"Not for a few years yet, if we're lucky."

"But what if they catch on?"

"We'll think of something," Piett said encouragingly.

Pausing, thinking deeply, CT-585 sighed, knowing what would have to be done. "I'll have to self-terminate."

The boy seemed completely taken back. "W-what?"

"You heard me," he snarled, afraid, yet determined. "I'll have to kill myself soon. Or someone else will have to do it. No one can find out what Lord Vader was planning. They'll be too many questions, and I won't soil his good name, even in death. The only way to truly bury all this mess is to get rid of all the clues."

"You're being awful extreme, don't you think?" Piett scowled. "There are other ways to hide this than by killing you."

"It'd be the best way."

"And what happens if they did an autopsy on you?" the other man challenged. "They'd probably still find out."

"Then I'll make sure I die in a way that completely decimates my body."

"Are you mad?" Piett hissed, getting right into the trooper's face, brown eyes flashing in anger and panic. "There are other ways! We can always fake your death or just plain send you

off somewhere without a trace. You could live out the remainder of your life somewhere quiet and out of the way.”

“Yeah, because no one would ever guess that I’m a clone,” CT-585 rolled his eyes, slightly disturbed by the other’s reaction to this. He’d thought Piett would understand, being a military man.

“No,” the commander said firmly. ‘You’re not killing yourself. That’s an order,’ he snarled. “Try anything and I’ll ship you off to the Outer Rim under the care of some old farmer so fast, your helmet’ll still be spinning.”

Despite the grave situation that had occurred, that was being discussed, Cory found himself smirking ever so slightly. “Ordering a man that wants to die not to is a low blow, Commander.”

“Good,” Piett snorted. “I hope I turn out to be the cruelest officer in the fleet.”

The clone chuckled lightly, ignoring the pain it caused his shoulder. “You’re on your way, Sir.”

As they fell into their own thoughts, Cory took a chance to look about the room. It was a small, clinical looking place, everything white. There was only the bed he was laying in and the chair in which Piett sat. Whatever sort of ship they were on, it was a good bet that he’d never been in one before. It didn’t seem like the sort of transport that would allow clones on. It was almost like a civilian style ship.

Inspecting his companion too, it was obvious that Piett hadn’t gotten much rest, despite his injury. The normally pristine uniform was wrinkled and the always neat hair looked greasy, like it hadn’t been washed for a while. And the boy’s face, too, bespoke of restlessness and fatigue. Had he not rested since waking up after the Jedi attack? How long ago had that been?

“How long have I been out?” he decided to ask.

“Nearly five hours,” Piett responded quietly.

“Have you had any rest, Sir?”

“No, not really,” the other admitted. “There’d been so much to do.”

The clone frowned. “What were they ordering you to do with a head wound?”

It surprised Cory when Piett let out a small laugh. It sounded very weary. “It’s what I’ve been order me to do, that’s the thing.”

“And what’s that?” CT-585 asked slowly, afraid that perhaps the commander was more tired than he was letting on and would likely snap at any moment.

Smiling surprisingly genuine, Piett answered honestly, “Taking care of you.”

Silence. Cory wasn’t sure how he should respond to that or what to think of it. No one outside of his brothers had ever cared for him, and even they didn’t go out of their way to sit with him like this. He was... touched. “Maybe you should go take some rest, too, Commander,” he responded gently.

The boy shook his head once more, leaning back in his chair. “I’m fine here.”

Strange. Piett was just as eccentric as Padmé, he realized, though in a different sort of way. “Why are you doing this?”

Brown eyes locked on to Cory’s own, and again, it appeared as though a much older man were staring at him, a man with harsh experience. It made the trooper want to know about his friend, to really know him, to understand how the boy could be like this while so young. Truly the commander’s life must have been harder than he’d let on before when at the Nabberies.

“Is it so hard to believe that there are really still people in the galaxy that value life?”

The clone didn’t respond.

“Get some rest,” Piett leaned back farther, closing those intense eyes. “We’ve got a lot to do when we reach Coruscant.”

And for once, Cory obeyed the new commander without question. He was slowly beginning to see what Lord Vader must have seen in the boy all along. His respect and faith in his friend had tripled, and come what may, he knew that he at least had one ally in a future that was beginning to look so uncertain.

### 33. The Awakening

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Obi-Wan Kenobi sat in a numb state of shock in the common area of the bulk cruiser Freedom, trying to wrap his mind around what had just happened. The fight over Naboo had been vicious after the explosion of the civilian ship piloted by Darth Vader. Seeing their Supreme Commander murdered, along with Senator Amidala, had sent the Imperials into an enraged frenzy, the likes of which the Jedi had never seen. Imperial fighters had swarmed everything, becoming bolder and more reckless with their moves. It only served to mount up the casualties list. After the initial shock of it all, the enemy had not wasted time in rallying under their fallen commander's banner.

For the Rebels, it had been a close call to get away at all. Many didn't. But there were a few, like Obi-Wan and the Freedom that had managed to get out of the tumult somehow. But the young Jedi didn't really remember having done so. He'd been so stunned, unable to grasp what had happened, that he had managed to do everything on autopilot after the explosion. There were vague memories of twisting out of fire, rushing out into the stars, but he honestly couldn't remember much after the Force explosion.

Even now, hours after the event, after somehow managing to come on board the Rebel ship, Obi-Wan still couldn't come to terms with what had happened. It just didn't make sense. After everything that they had all been through, after all their planning, after all the heartache, it ended up like this? The mission had failed. Senator Amidala was dead. And Darth Vader... well, despite the release from Darkness, Obi-Wan wasn't sure if what happened to the Sith was good or not.

None of this made sense. After all Qui-Gon had told him, it just didn't make sense! Darth Vader was supposed to be taken care of by the Chosen One. Obi-Wan had even started to feel the Chosen One, had put his entire faith into the other's coming. But did this change things now that Vader was gone? On the surface it appeared to be a good thing. Now there was only the Emperor to deal with. This was all for the better...

But at what cost? At what cost were they now willing to obtain peace? They had killed an innocent woman, someone who had only even had the Rebellion's best interests at heart. They had all been willing to shoot down an unarmed vessel with little thought, to shoot those who couldn't even defend themselves. It scared Obi-Wan to realize that had the senator not been on board, he would have likely shot at Vader as well. Shot at him in an unfair, honor-less attempt to gain his own definition of peace. What kind of 'peace' was this?

The Jedi was startled from his thoughts when a blanket was wrapped around his shoulders. Looking up, he saw Senator Mon Mothma and Admiral Uton standing beside him, worried expressions on their faces. "Are you all right, Knight Kenobi?"

Several rather nasty things wanted to break free and he seriously contemplated telling them to just leave him alone, but he knew they did not deserve such abuse from him for showing their concern. Releasing his frustrations to the Force, he gave them a weak attempt of a smile, before deciding it was useless, and just ended up nodded. "Well enough," he responded.

“You’ve been sitting here for hours,” the senator sat down beside him. “Perhaps you should go to the medics?”

“I’m fine.”

The admiral frowned. “You’ve got a rather nasty looking burn on your arm, and your head’s got dried blood on it.”

“Does it?” Obi-Wan reached up and lightly touched all around his head. Sure enough, he found a rather large hole just above his forehead. He realized he must have gotten it when he hit his head on the floor after the first lightning attack Vader had used on him. Or had it been the second? He couldn’t really remember now, it seeming so long ago now. There was also a rather large bump to the back of the head from falling to the Sith at some point too. At least he remembered getting his arm wound.

“Master Jedi,” Mothma began calmly, “you really ought to go see the medic.”

Another sigh escaped him, but Obi-Wan just couldn’t muster the will to do more than sit here and think. In fact, he hadn’t felt any pain until they had said something to him about his injuries. And now it was only the echoes of dull pain in the back of his mind. It might have been the sign of some sort of trauma, but even knowing this couldn’t induce him to move. All he could feel was shock, horror, and fatigue.

His continued silence must have worried the others even more, because suddenly, he felt the admiral’s arm being slipped under his, Mon’s on the other side. A part of Obi-Wan felt a bit violated and a little offended that they didn’t take his word for it, but then, he was probably not thinking too clearly at the moment. It would be better to get himself checked out rather than fall into a worse case of neglect.

When they made it to the med-bay, the Jedi sat down at one table while a droid came to check over his injuries. They weren’t as extensive as the last time he’d faced the Sith, but then, he hadn’t really fought Vader all that much. His mind went automatically to Master Yoda. He dearly hoped that the old master had survived, as he wasn’t sure what would become of the Jedi way should the Grand Master die. The thought of being the last of the Jedi was frightening.

They all remained silent as the droid worked, and Obi-Wan found it strange that the others were even staying at all. Didn’t they have important things to be discussing? He didn’t like being watched like this. The spark of negative emotion soon spread surprisingly quick, growing from irritation to anger. All the events he’d witness suddenly culminated into focused anger, and the Jedi came out of his shocked daze and into full awareness. Now that he was looking at them, the young Knight realized that he had questions, and he was determined to get answers.

“So,” he began stiffly, unable to completely hide his anger, “who gave the order to murder Senator Amidala?”

Senator Mothma and Admiral Uton’s eyes widened in astonishment. “‘Murdered,’ Master Jedi?” Uton asked, appearing genuinely confused. It only irritated Obi-Wan more. “No one ‘murdered’ her. She was an unfortunate casualty of—”

“She was an innocent casualty of politics,” he snapped, jerking away from the droid that was trying to work on his arm. “I’d almost gotten her to safety when the order came to—”

“‘Safety’?” Mothma scoffed. “You call sending her back into enemy clutches safety?”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan responded with an air of superiority, counteracting the other’s prudish manner. “She was at least safe with Vader, as apparently even the Imperials knew not to shoot at an unmarked civilian vessel.”

“The Imperials shot at—” the admiral began, but Obi-Wan cut him off.

“They fired in their direction in attempts to shoot at Rebel fighters, their real targets. They didn’t just give up on their directive and—”

“Please calm down, Master Jedi,” the senator soothed, but Obi-Wan wanted none of it. “What happened was just what always happens in war. It was a tragic turn of events. We are just lucky that something good came from all of this.”

Good? Was that really how they were viewing this? One of the worst battles between the Empire and Rebels in their short history, having lost the most casualties yet was good? Allowing their main objective to die all because they...

Obi-Wan’s eyes widened in revelation when the Force whispered secrets to him. Turning towards the other two beings in the room, staring at them as they calmly stood before him, a sick feeling crawled up the Jedi’s spine. He tried to shake the feeling away, but knew he could not deny the Force when it was speaking to him so directly. He could just hear his master’s voice telling him to listen, to open himself up to the Living Force.

“You... weren’t trying to save Senator Amidala,” he said slowly, feeling for the rightness in the Force before continuing. ‘You had your own objective. You weren’t really all that interested in saving Senator Amidala at all,’ he accused boldly, having the Force sing the truth. “This whole time, while Senator Organa, Master Yoda, and I planned to retrieve her, you were just using us as a distraction for this space battle!”

The admiral had gone a rather interesting shade of white, while the senator was better able to keep a calm, composed expression. “This had to be done, Knight Kenobi,” Mothma replied simply, making Obi-Wan feel sick all over again. “We knew that you would lead Vader out one way or another, and we had to make a move to kill him.”

“By sacrificing Senator Amidala? Your friend?” he cried indignantly.

“Padmé’s death is... a great loss,” the woman said quietly, looking down at her folded hands in front of her. “But I know she would have accepted this fate, this plan, had she known about it. She understood that the fate of the galaxy is more important than just one life.”

“Perhaps,” Obi-Wan answered tightly. “But that doesn’t mean that you should sell your souls in order to win. Just look at what happened to the Emperor.”

Mothma scowled, while the admiral turned red in fury. “Spare us your holier than thou, speech, Jedi,” the admiral snapped. “Stop twisting the truth.”

For the first time in his life, a lesson Qui-Gon had always tried to teach him finally clicked. He’d been right. His master had been right about everything. Arguing with beings would never get him anywhere, because, in the end, they would not listen. They would

always see things from their own point of view and little could change that. And right now, from Senator Mothma and Admiral Utonm they had accomplished a necessary evil, something that would ultimately lead to the betterment of the galaxy. They saw their crime as justified.

Obi-Wan kept silent, just staring at them. He knew they were growing uncomfortable, but he did nothing to ease their awkwardness. Instead, he sat still, allowing the droid to finish patching him up before he easily slid off the table and walked out of the room. He couldn't stand to be around them any longer, and there was a lot to think about.

"Where are you going?" the admiral called.

"Away," the Jedi called over his shoulder, not bothering to look back. "You should too. The Empire will be coming after you soon. I suggest you find somewhere to hide, disband, and keep under the radar for as long as possible so that no more innocent lives are lost in your justified plans."

And with that, Obi-Wan turned his back on the Rebellion, went straight to the hanger and into his Naboo fighter, and left. He couldn't even find it within himself to feel guilty about it. Why shouldn't he turn his back on them after they were so willing to turn their backs to everyone else?

As he sat back in the pilot's chair, the young man sighed, letting his head fall into his hands while the droid took over flying. "How did I get into this mess?" he moaned, wishing he could just fly away from all of his confusion and anger.

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Burning. She was burning alive. There was fire everywhere, and she was slowly burning to death. The heat was unbearable and she couldn't scream. Everything hurt, but she couldn't make it stop. All she could do was burn, burn so slowly, so agonizingly...

Padmé's eyes snapped open, and she gasped, bolting upright. The sudden action sent fire shooting through her side, and her head spinning. A pathetic whimper escaped her before she could think better of it, and it took several full minutes for her to recover before she found the courage to open her eyes again.

Peeling them open carefully, she found she had to squint. It was bright. Very bright, and she felt blinded. Everything looked white before it slowly faded into a light, sandy yellow. After another moment, she realized it was sand. And as she looked up into the pale, dry sky, she realized why it was so hot. There were twin suns overhead, slowly baking her alive, unconcerned with her welfare.

Immediately after this discovery, Padmé had to look down again, feeling overwhelmed with the light and having to once again readjust her eyes. Strange, dark spots danced before them, and she worried that maybe she would pass out. But that couldn't be too bad, could it? After all, this had to be a dream. A hellish, horrible dream.

When the spots cleared, she decided that perhaps it would be wise to take inventory of herself. While she still had all her limbs, she wished her head had been cut off. It would have stopped the pain, surely. And it felt as though someone had sucker-punched her in the side several times. Tentatively, she gently touched the injured place, relieved to feel that no ribs

had been broken. In fact, she didn't think anything was, though she could tell her ankle was in pretty bad shape. She checked it too, knowing it was sound, but worried about the swelling. It was obviously sprained.

After a time, she decided that, all in all, with only some bumps and bruises, she was perfectly intact. Whatever happened to her, she'd survived. The only question was: what had she survived?

Looking around her, Padmé saw twisted metal pieces. A crash. She'd been in some sort of crash. Even knowing this, she just couldn't make her mind work. Why would she have been in a crash? Where had she been going? Where could she have been going where there was so much sand?

At last it occurred to her that there should be more pieces of the wreckage, and she turned around. Her eyes widened in surprise before automatically going back to a squint so she could see through the brightness. There was an obliterated looking little sphere, the outside almost completely burned into an unrecognizable mesh. The inside of it was little better. While the interior didn't seem to have gotten burned so badly, it was hardly intact. There were wires hanging down and most everything looked completely smashed. Other smaller details she couldn't see from where she was, having apparently been thrown a ways from the actual wreckage, but she knew it didn't look good.

A dark, blob beside the wreckage caught Padmé's attention, and she squinted more to try and see what it was. It had yet to occur to her shaken, battered brain that she could just stand up and go look. It was probably just another piece from the pod, but something kept her eyes fixed upon it. It was dark, burned looking, yet not quite metal...

"Vader!" she gasped, her voice coming out as a parched croak, but she hardly noticed. That's when everything clicked in her mind. The Rebel attempt to rescue her, Vader coming to get her, the Jedi, the space battle, the attack, it all made sense! Vader had been flying through battle and told her to go to the escape pod, when suddenly... her memory cut out about there. The last thing she could clearly remember was something—Vader?—covering her up completely before an explosion. From there, she didn't remember a thing.

Pushing herself up on shaking legs, the senator nearly fell back over. Her ankle was indeed sprained, and it hurt like hell to walk the short distance to the wreckage, but she forced herself to stumble over. When she came beside the Sith Lord, she fell to her knees and looked over him in a panic.

Vader did not look good. His helmet was cracked in several places and the lens from the mask was still missing, giving her a little glimpse of the man she'd been sleeping with. She could just make out pale skin around the closed eye. But the fact that he was unconscious scared her and she couldn't focus much on her curiosity at the moment. It especially scared her since she didn't hear his respirator and the controls on his chest were completely smashed. His suit, too, looked torn in many places, burned, and the cape that he usually adorned was nowhere to be seen. The chain that had held it around his neck was gone, having probably been ripped off.

But most alarmingly, Vader's arm was completely caught underneath of what remained of the escape pod. There was no way that it was not broken, but a break would be the least of their worries. There was no telling how burned it was, how crushed, or ripped apart. All sorts



of horrible images came to her mind about just how damaged it was. He would certainly be in a lot of pain with it when he woke up. It was probably a blessing he was still knocked out.

Desperate to do something to help, Padmé threw herself at the pod in hopes of pushing it off of the injured limb. The moment she touched the metal, however, she cried out in pain and jumped away, only managing to hurt her ankle more. The pod was, of course, extremely hot from the fire and the scorching heat of the planet. She hadn't thought about that. It was lucky she had only touched it a moment.

There was no way to move this without hurting herself or Vader further, she realized with panic. She had to get help, but in the heat of the day, she didn't know where to even begin. There was no sign of civilization anywhere. Actually, there was no sign of anything. It was all a sea of sand, the distance shimmering from the heat. It was far too hot and there was no shade or water for her to quench her dry throat. Vader couldn't be any better either. He was wearing all black with a mask.

She could always try and walk, but she knew she wouldn't get very far. She was not even wearing shoes. It was quite likely that she'd fall over from heat exhaustion quickly. And then there was the fact that she couldn't leave him here like this. What if someone found him? What if there were wild animals? Though she had to admit, those were quite foolish ideas considering she didn't think there could be any life forms on this planet. There was just... nothing.

A horrible groan startled her from her thoughts, and suddenly afraid that she'd thought wrong, Padmé looked around, wondering if there was some sort of animal nearby. When she still saw nothing, she looked down at the Sith, and realized that he was waking up. She knelt back down beside him instantly.

"Shh, it's okay," she soothed, hoping her dry voice didn't scare him. "I'm here. Shh."

She watched the hole where his eyes was in absolute curiosity, waiting to see it open. Although it had been brief, she'd seen his eye when in the pod, she recalled, just after he yelled at her to go to the back. What she'd seen had startled her. A blazing ruby-golden eye had glared at her. Sith eyes.

A part of her didn't want to see that eye again. It had been terrifying, only reminding her more of what this man really was. But at the same time, anything about him fascinated her, and she craved to know as much about him as possible... even if it wasn't something she would necessarily like. If he wouldn't tell her, she would wait, as she always did, for little scraps of information to come her way.

The long awaited eye finally peeled open, out of focus, before closing just as quickly as another groan escaped him. Realizing that the sun had blinded him, like it had her, she tried to angle herself so that her head cast a shadow over his face so that he could see her and have the benefit of shade.

"Shh, it's all right," she cooed, hoping he wouldn't just lose consciousness again.

Again, the eye opened, and Padmé found herself startled to see no blazing ruby-gold, but a sickly yellowish-almost-purple. The eye locked on to her, and the senator felt herself freeze. Unlike the last time when she'd seen his naked eye, she'd been too petrified of the battle going around to notice, but as he stared at her now... she couldn't move. His eyes were so...

hard. She couldn't even see his entire face, but just that one eye was enough to stun her, the gaze so intense. It was like a laser, cutting through her to see into her very soul.

It was only when Vader looked away that Padmé was released from the spell, and as he tried to move, she snapped out of it enough to gently take his shoulders in both of her hands as best as she could. "Wait," she crooned. "Wait. Your arm. It's caught under the pod. You'll hurt yourself if you try and sit up."

Again, that intimidating eye glanced her way before his head swiveled pathetically from side to side. Not once since the beginning of the Empire did Padmé ever think that she would see the fearsome Darth Vader in such a state. In fact, she'd never really imagined that he could get hurt.

"My 'saber," his voice came out in a strange, synthesized muffle. A part of the speaker obvious half-worked, but with the respirator out, and the hole in the helmet, the real voice underneath was allowed to come through in a stuffy muffle. Again, another spike of curiosity shot through Padmé at the thought of hearing his real voice. She just wished it wasn't as distorted as it was.

"My 'saber," he wheezed again, snapping the senator from her private reservations.

Looking out over the sand and wreckage, she searched for the fallen weapon. It took her a moment to realize that he probably wanted it to help free himself from the pod. Vaguely she wondered why she hadn't thought of that. But then, she'd knocked her head pretty good, apparently. She was having a hard time remembering things quickly.

At last, she found the deadly cylinder, and staggered back towards the still Sith, trying not to cry as she walked on her poor ankle. But she made it back to him fast enough, and wondered briefly which button turned it on. She'd never held a lightsaber before, and maybe it was just the heat cooking her brain, but she took a moment to study it before kneeling back down next to her fallen companion. "I have it," she said gently. "How do you want me to do this?"

He didn't bother answering. Instead, he took the lightsaber from her, and made a rather pitiable attempt to roll over on his side, to face the trapped arm. She wanted to scold him, to tell him not to move so much, but after a hiss of pain, he managed to turn over halfway, just enough to survey the damage done. Padmé watched in confusion as he slipped the 'saber down on the ground, near where his arm was trapped. It puzzled her further when she saw the hilt being placed under his caught arm.

Realization came a second too late, and with absolute horror, Padmé watched as he ignited his lightsaber, jerking upwards. A small cry escaped her as she watched him sever his own limb. "What are you doing?!"

Was he crazy? There had to have been another way to free him than this! A Force push! I should have told him to do a Force push! she lamented, kicking herself for her failure. And now because she'd been too slow to think, she hadn't been able to stop him from harming himself further. It was obvious that the crash had shaken him up as badly as it had her. He clearly wasn't thinking straight if his first thought was to maim himself.

While she didn't know much about the lightsaber itself, the senator was more than experienced with seeing 'saber wounds. When she'd been queen and Master Qui-Gon Jinn

and then Padawan Obi-Wan Kenobi had been protecting her, she'd seen what their weapons could do first hand. While it in part cauterized the wound, a lightsaber wound could still bleed, and it could certainly get infected if left untreated. And of course, it damaged the skin around it from the burn. It was not a painless wound to have.

She was just about to start scolding Vader, to panic, when she noticed something strange as he was once again lying on his back, panting heavily. The new stump was not bleeding, nor did it smell of burnt flesh. No, in fact, there was no flesh. Wires stuck out in all different directions. It was mechanical. Vader had a mechanical arm.

"Help me."

The weak plea startled Padmé further, tipping her over the edge from shocked to completely flabbergasted. While the mechanical arm should not have surprised her as much as it did, his plea for help nearly undid her. It had to be the first time in the Sith's life that he asked for help.

"W-what?" she asked, shaking her head, trying to clear her raging emotions.

"Help me... take... this mask off," he panted, that strange not-quiet Vader voice explained in an exhausted manner.

The galaxy stopped turning for Padmé as his request slowly sank into her brain. He... wanted her to take his mask off. "I'll... I'll see your face," she breathed, not even sure what she meant by that.

The Sith struggled to sit up, and Padmé quickly tried to help, pushing on his back gently to assist. He was a lot heavier than she would have thought, but eventually, between their meager efforts, Vader was in a relative upright position. He had slumped forward a bit, apparently too weak to remain completely erect.

"The helmet should... be easy to take off," he explained, still sounding frightfully weak, ignoring her previous statement completely. "Lift straight up."

The galaxy stopped completely, and it took several moments before Padmé could breathe again. It took several moments longer to prepare herself for what she was about to do, what she was about to see. At long last, she would get to see the face of Darth Vader, the Slayer of Worlds. The Emperor's Heir. The man that she was having an affair with. The man she loved.

With trembling hands, Padmé did as she was ordered and closed her hands around the once pristine dome. There was a little resistance, probably from there being something to lock it in place, but it came off easily enough. From the noise it made, she realized that it must have stayed locked and sealed mostly from suction, a vacuum the suit created. And once feeling no resistance, she closed her eyes and quickly pulled the rest of the way up.

When she managed to open her eyes again, the first thing she noticed were a crossing of straps that obviously kept the face mask on. But then when she really looked at the back of the head, she found herself completely shocked to see his hair. Blonde. There was blonde hair. Darth Vader was blonde.

"The mask," a comfortingly impatient prod from Vader returned Padmé to her senses, and she quickly set about unfastening the straps. When at last, he was free, she held her breath and carefully eased it away from his face, heart pounding in her chest as she would finally get

to see the true face behind the mask, see who and what Darth Vader really was. To see who her lover was.

There was nothing else in the galaxy but this moment, and working to keep herself calm, she slowly brought the mask to her chest and looked down at it. This was the only face she'd ever known him with. This was who she woke up and saw every morning, the face she saw before everything went dark. This was the face she dreamed about, who she longed for. A part of her didn't want to look back up and see what truly lay beneath this mask. What if... what if she couldn't cope with what she saw? What if she, somehow, loved only the mask?

But chiding herself for such shallow feelings, for such insecurity, Padmé took another deep breath and looked up. His hair had surprised her, but his face... There were no words to describe how she felt the moment she saw Darth Vader's face. His true face.

He was... young. Very young. Padmé couldn't believe it, but she thought he might even be younger than her. It was a handsome face which now stood before her, angular features, a defined jawline. There was a dimple in his chin, and a long scar that ran down his right eye. As she looked at him more, trying to memorize his features, as if he would suddenly adorn the helmet again, she realized he had more little scars around his face, near his temple and up by his hairline.

Meeting stormy, purplish eyes, Padmé found she had tears in her eyes. This. This was Darth Vader. This was the monster behind the mask. A young man. Almost a boy. This was the man that had slayed worlds, the man that had killed women and children indiscriminately. This was the Destroyer of the Jedi. A young man that could not have been anything but a teenager when the Empire had begun. What sort of life must this creature have had?

The features staring at her were severe and betrayed nothing. It was almost like another mask, but Padmé searched for any sign of humanity she could find. There was very little emotion, though, in his expression.

Vader seemed... uneasy, though it didn't show. She wasn't sure how she knew, but Padmé knew he was. He'd never even been comfortable with showing his face when they slept together, this must have been a necessary evil for him. Why had he tried to hide himself, she wondered? Was it to hide his age? Had there really been some sort of accident?

"I need to get out of this suit," he spoke quietly.

That voice. A real voice. Not a synthesized deep bass, but a real, human voice. It was still deep, but much lighter than the one she'd gotten used to. It struck Padmé as strange to hear an obvious accent in the voice, too. While Vader had never spoken with the accent of the posh of Coruscant, he'd never sounded like this either. The mask had somehow distorted and hidden his accent. Now, however, Padmé heard a distinct Outer Rim inflection that she couldn't remember ever hearing before. Who was this man?

But not wanting him to get upset or angry, and not wanting him to feel any more uncomfortable than he obviously was, she moved around the back again to help him with the suit. It took quite a while to peel off the thick thing, first having to remove the armor around his neck, shoulders, and shins before the suit could be properly removed. It was slow going, too, as Vader was apparently extremely beat up from the crash and had to stop to pant every so often, which alarmed Padmé greatly.

Eventually the suit was off, and Vader was left wearing only a baggy pair of pants, and a thin black long-sleeved shirt. It was as he struggled to pull back on his tall boots, having had to take them off to get out of his suit, that Padmé noticed a whole in the shirt at the side, it having been camouflaged by...

"You're bleeding!" she exclaimed in alarm. That was why he must have been struggling as much as he had been. He was hurt. Really hurt.

The Sith didn't reply, but instead, tried to stand. Padmé tried to help him as he swayed unsteadily on his feet. After finding a balance, he looked out around the landscape with a grim expression. Without a word, he leaned over and began trying to collect all his suit articles and his helmet. He wasn't going to answer to exclamation at all.

"What are you doing?" she asked in alarm. "You shouldn't be bending and moving about with that—"

"Help me," he ordered, not even bothering to look at her.

"But—"

"Pick them up."

Unable to refuse, and wanting him to stop moving about as much, Padmé did as she was commanded and ended up picking up most of his things. It was at least comforting to know his abrasive attitude had survived the crash, she thought sourerly.

With a nod of satisfaction once all articles of clothing were picked up, he stumbled over towards the pod. "Throw it in."

She did as instructed, but couldn't understand what he hoped to accomplish. Vader ended up going into what was left of the pod, dumping the few things he'd managed to pick up, before coming back out a second later. He was holding some sort of bag in his hand. Padmé realized it was the emergency kit that her father had kept in the pod. The outside was burned, but most of the contents looked to be in fairly good order.

Also in his hand, Vader had managed to find her slippers, somehow still all in one piece. He threw them down on the ground for her, and she instantly put them on. It was a lot nicer to feel then the rough, hot sand between her toes.

Slinging the pack on his back, Vader turned to the pod one last time, taking his lightsaber and cutting into a certain part of what looked to have been the control panels at some point. The pod instantly caught fire, and along with it, his suit and helmet. And with that, the Sith turned away from the blaze and began a slow stumble away, out into the dessert.

Padmé was forced to follow, walking just as slowly on her injured ankle. "Where are we going to go?" she asked, looking back at the fire behind her. There wasn't much here, and she was very afraid that Vader was just walking out into the dessert to die. She couldn't see any signs of life.

"Town," he responded with a grunt.

"What town?"

"Mos Espa."

“‘Mos Espa’?” she repeated in surprise. “You know where we are?”

“Tatooine.”

Looking out in the direction they were walking towards, Padmé squinted, trying to see what he was talking about. She saw nothing. There was nothing there. Everything looked the same to her, in fact, and she wasn’t sure how he knew where he was going. Was he hallucinating? Was the heat and his wounds getting to him?

“Tatooine,” she said slowly, trying to recall anything that she could about the planet, but coming up with nothing. “You’ve been here before?”

There was a long pause, and for a moment, she either thought he was ignoring her again or he hadn’t heard her. But then, softly, he gave a surprising reply. “I used to live here.”

This was all beginning to be too much. Padmé felt like her brain would short circuit if she learned one more new tidbit about Vader. After yearning to know him better for so long, now that she was, it was overwhelming. She was tired, in pain, confused, and desperately hot. And so instead of wasting energy asking all the questions that buzzed around in her head, she settled for a nod and left it at that.

In a slow ramble, the two injured survivors made their trek into the desert of Tatooine, not once looking back, even as the fire from their pod burned with hellish fire.

## 34. Mos Espa

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For hours the two survivors of the pod-crash trekked along the dessert in the scorching heat. There were moments when Padmé honestly had thoughts of sitting down and just crying — if she could produce tears in this heat. She was so tired and sore, and she didn't think that she could move another step. But true to form, the Naberrrie stubbornness kept her aching feet moving, even when she seriously contemplated just laying down and dying.

But it was honestly not just her stubbornness that kept her going. Despite his earlier bravo, Vader wasn't doing well. It became apparent very soon after they began walking towards the town he believed was out there, that between his wounds and the heat, he was fading faster than she was. The stumbled steps soon became the dragging of feet and he swayed dangerously about. The harsh features soon relaxed into pained winces and his unnatural eyes glazed completely over. It was then that Padmé knew she would have to step up and keep them going or they would never make it. Vader had pointed out the direction, and now it would be up to her to get them there.

The suns began slowly going towards the west, but not enough to cool anything. She had no idea what time it was, but if she had to guess, she would say it was getting on in the afternoon. It was still so hot, and she knew it would only get hotter before the suns went down. While her training as queen had taught her a lot of basic survival skills for any terrain just in case negotiations anywhere failed her, Padmé knew her knowledge about the dessert was extremely limited. But she did know that they had to get out of this heat soon and needed water desperately.

No sooner had she begun to despair when Vader fell over. It was an ungraceful fall, and he hit the sand with a hard thud. There was just the briefest moment of horror when she thought perhaps he'd died, but the slight rise and fall of his back showed her that that was not the case. They were both still alive... for the time being.

Rushing to his side as best as she could, Padmé knelt down beside him, turning him over so that his face wasn't buried in the sand. His expression was one of pain, and once more the senator was surprised by the young face before her. She still couldn't believe that this was the horrid creature that terrorized the galaxy. This young man was the nightmare that oppressed the galaxy in a ruthless, iron grip. How could he have become so twisted and be so young?

But there wasn't time to think about that at the moment. Right now, she had to make sure he was all right. Even though there was a slight disconnect in her mind about who and what he was, her main priority was to make sure he lived. He'd risked everything for her before, now it was her turn to take care of him.

"Are you okay?" she murmured, not sure if he was even conscious.

"Water," the Sith mumbled.

Padmé's heart broke at the request and any hopes she'd been harboring died. "I don't have any," she whispered, stroking his hair, amazed once more to be able to see it and feel it. But

the wonder was nearly lost on her as she felt so ashamed and defeated.

It was pathetic to watch as Vader stretched out the nub of what remained of his left arm, as if reaching for something. “Water,” he said again, and it was then that Padmé remembered the pack he’d be carrying.

Water! The emergency pack would surely have some sort of water in it! That’s what Vader had meant. Perhaps he wasn’t so out of it and hallucinating. All but jumping at the pack, the senator began rummaging through their meager supplies, wading through the wrapped rations, before her hand finally touched something solid. Pulling it out, she nearly cried in joy at the sight of a canteen. The water was sure to be hot, but it would at least be wet. Right now, that was all that mattered.

Screwing the top open, she carefully lifted Vader’s head and tried to pour a little into his mouth. The Sith seemed to come out of his daze and sat up on his own, snatching the canteen from her hand before pouring a small mouthful onto his dried tongue. After only the smallest sip, he handed the canteen to Padmé. She took it, giving him a questioning look.

“You should have some more,” she said.

“No,” he panted, looking out into the dessert, still swaying even as he sat. “We need to save... as much as possible.”

Nodding her understanding, Padmé followed his example and only took enough water to get her mouth wet. She desperately wanted more, but knew Vader was right. After all, if what he’d said was true, if he had really lived here once, he would know how to survive in a dessert much better than she did. A part of her wondered if listening to him while he was in such a state was wise, but it was all she had to go on. Their only hope of survival was through him, as disconcerting as that sounded.

“Do you need to sit another moment?” she asked. It was so hot out and they were both exhausted, but she wasn’t sure if they should keep moving or wait for the cool of darkness. Both had their ups and downs.

“No,” Vader began pushing himself up, and Padmé was forced to help him. He was such a big man, still towered over her, and she dreaded what would happen if he fell unconscious. She couldn’t carry him nor could she drag him. He was just too large. If he went down she couldn’t leave him, and she would probably have to die alongside him.

Don’t think like that, she scolded herself harshly. We can do this. We need to stay positive. If you start doubting or getting too down, that’s when things get worse.

When on his feet, the Sith looked back out into the shimmering distance, and not for the first time Padmé wondered if he could actually see something or if it was something else. Maybe his strange Force powers helped him in seeing what was out there? Maybe he sensed the town?

“I don’t know how much farther it is,” she prompted, hoping he was lucid enough to give her an estimation. If she had a number, she could brace herself, give herself a goal to hold on to.

“About five kilometers.”



Five kilometers? That wasn't very far at all! At their current pace, they could probably make it in around two hours. They could make it out of this hell hole and maybe get some help! "Can you make it that much further?" she asked, wishing she could keep the hope from her voice. She didn't want to push him. If he couldn't make it, then perhaps it would be possible for her to leave him for just a time and get some help.

"Yes."

And without waiting for her, he pushed himself forward, setting a steady pace. Catching up rather easily to him, Padmé stayed close, wishing that there was something she could do to help him. But honestly, she didn't have too much energy to spend either. It was amazing she hadn't fallen over herself.

So it was a long, quiet walk farther and farther into the dessert, towards the town that Vader had said existed. It wasn't easy, and a few times Vader fell again. The wound in his side was pretty bad, but the Sith hardly seemed to notice it. Instead, he kept muttering about needing shade and about her not having shoes. It was mostly just mumbles to Padmé, but she still found it oddly sweet that he was worried about her not having shoes while he very well could be bleeding to death. Truly he was the strangest of all the Sith Lords to have ever existed, surely.

But she could never give him time to pause and rest as she was forced to drive him forward before he passed out completely. She could just make out something in the distance, and she sorely hoped it wasn't a mirage. "Just a little further," she coaxed. "I can see the town."

Vader remained silent, panting, looking worse and worse by the moment. It was imperative that they get moving again. Pulling out the canteen, she gave him a little more water, wishing she could make it cool for him. "Just a little further."

She wasn't expecting an answer so she wasn't disappointed when one wasn't forthcoming. And it was with the utmost regret that she had to help him up and walk again. It surprised her that he had been able to make it this far. Either his wounds were better than she had thought or he was much tougher than she had given him credit for. Ruefully she realized that had he been in his suit, she would have never thought of him as helpless or weak, but without the suit... He was just so young. It was hard not to feel... something when watching him struggle as much as he was.

The last twenty minutes of their walk was perhaps the most torturous, and in the end, Vader eventually had to lean on her awkwardly to stay upright. By the time they made it to the outskirts of the town, they were dirty, tired, sun-burnt, and thirsty. At the first building, Vader collapsed in its shade, leaning against it as he wheezed. Padmé wasn't much better. She slumped down beside him, panting, leaning back.

Taking out the canteen again, she gave him the remainder of the water, before just falling back into miserable exhaustion. It took what remaining energy she had to turn her head to stare at the Sith beside her. His eyes were tightly shut, and his chest rose and fell rapidly. He looked pale and was sweating profusely, but at least he was in the shade.

So, knowing she could rest for a moment, Padmé allowed her eyes to close and her head to loll back. Before she knew what was happening, she fell asleep.

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A soft mumble roused Padmé from her accidental nap.

“—oak or credits.”

“I don’t want my cloak or credits.”

“You want to give them to me.”

“I want to give them to you.”

And as she opened her eyes, the weary senator looked up to see a strange alien standing over her and... and Vader staring intently at him. She watched in confusion as the stranger took off his cloak and gave it to the Sith, as well as a pouch. It took a moment for her weary brain to realize what had just happened.

When the stranger left, Padmé glared over at the Sith. When he settled back against the wall, she decided to let him know she was awake. “What was that?”

Apparently their rest had been good for the Sith, because without preamble, he shoved the cloak and money at her. “Put this on,” he commanded. “Go buy water.”

“What?” she asked, pushing the ill-gotten items out of her face. “Did you... you just Jedi mind-tricked that guy.”

Vader scowled darkly at her. “Do it.”

Those unnatural eyes scared her more than she would have cared to admit, and knowing that arguing with him would be pretty pointless, she sighed. They really did need the water, and no one carried around their lifesaving, right? If they survived this, she’d have to come back and donate some money to this place in hopes that she could repay that male. So, reluctantly she sat forward, covering herself with the questionably obtained cloak.

Standing up was a different matter. She was so sore from everything that had happened, and while her legs shook, she forced herself to remain on her feet. Using the wall to drag herself up, Padmé was finally able to stand and hooked the money pouch in her pocket. When she noticed that Vader was attempting to stand as well, she instantly pushed him back down. “You can wait here,” she said gently. “I’ll go get help. Maybe someone will have some medicine to—”

“No,” he snapped. “Water. Go to the nearest cantina and get as much water as you can.”

Even with the different voice and the accent, Padmé could definitely hear the bossy side of Vader shining through. It was still so strange, however, to hear such commands from a young man rather than a Sith Lord in black armor. They had always been the same person, yet they weren’t quite in her mind. Not yet. The air around him was no longer as crushing or oppressive.

“You need medicine,” she reasoned. “Maybe I could get a doct—”

“Water,” he stated again, more firmly, only this time, Padmé could feel something brush against her mind, wanting her to lower her guard and just accept his words with little thought. He was trying to mind-trick her, she realized. He must really mean it.

“Fine,” she scowled, getting tired of the argument and turning away. “I’ll be back—”

“Wait!”

Surprised by the cry, Padmé turned around to see the severe face soften in concern before it hardened over once more. It tugged at her heart in ways she wasn’t even sure what it meant. This whole experience was almost more confusing than before, and she didn’t want to think about it too much at the moment or she knew it’d crush her. Her first duty was to make sure that they survived this ordeal before she could allow herself time to think, to reflect. Then she’d be able to break down if she needed, but not now.

It took a few moments before Vader decided to speak again, but Padmé waited patiently. She didn’t feel like pitying him with a prompt. So, after about a full minute, he reached over to his side, unclipped his lightsaber, and handed it up to her as best as he could without pulling his side. Wordlessly she took it, staring at him in shock.

“That button ignites it,” he muttered, pointing to a button on the hilt before slumping back against the wall, closing his eyes, as if dismissing her.

“Why would I need your lightsaber?” she asked, getting more and more frustrated with him by the moment. He was just being his usual irritating self, but Padmé was finding that her nerves were about shot and she didn’t appreciate his blunt detachment. It was clear that he was hurt and speaking too much caused some amount of discomfort, but honestly! They were on a strange planet, and surprisingly, he was allowing her to take control, the least he could do was explain what the hell was going on, or at least tell her what sort of planet this was and just explain things!

Sickly eyes opened again, and a slight frown found its way to the Sith’s lips. The look he gave her was one of irritated confusion, and it only served to aggravate the senator more. She was not stupid, and she didn’t appreciate those sorts of looks directed her way. “Just keep it,” she snapped, shoving it back in his face, too offended to stay with him any longer.

“You’ll need it more,” he insisted, his frown turning into an open scowl.

“Why?” she challenged, posting her hands on her hips. “I’m not the one that’s going to be sitting outside all alone and wounded.”

“You’ll be the one entering into a crowded area of mostly all males, in a nightgown, with no protection,” he growled dangerous. “No one’s going to care about a dying man.”

Dying? Did he really think he was dying? The thought sent panic coursing through the senator. She didn’t want him to die! Sure she wished he’d be a little nicer to her, but that didn’t mean she wanted him dead! Or was he just stating that he looked like he was in bad shape?

But after her initial fright left, having realized he had far too much fight left in him to be dying at the moment, Padmé recalled his other words. Darth Vader was a Sith Lord, and despite being injured, it was safe to assume that he could take care of himself, even if like this. The rest seemed to have perked him up a bit, and he was once again being ornery and feisty. She supposed that was something to be thankful for. His concern was not for himself, but her, she recognized. He was worried that others might take advantage of her. This was a foreign place, after all, and she was only in a nightgown. That’s why he’d gotten her a cloak,

so she could cover herself. In his own abrasive way, he was just trying to take care of her in return.

In the end, Padmé took a deep breath and brought her arm back down, tucking the lightsaber into her cloak. “Fine,” she muttered, not meeting his eyes. “I’ll be back soon.”

The Sith didn’t reply, but closed his eyes again. The sudden indifference confused and irritated Padmé once more, but she decided that there was still so much about him that she didn’t know, and she shouldn’t try to take too much offense because of him. Vader was still Vader, she had to remind herself again. Just because she now knew what he looked like didn’t mean that he was suddenly going to turn into some sort of sweet prince. A lot had changed between them since their first meeting, but that had taken over six months and a lot of struggling to come to this point now in their... relationship. This was just the beginning of a new step, she was sure, and steps with Vader were small and few and far in between.

Sighing, she shook her head and decided that the sooner she left, the sooner she could get back and sit with him again. Despite his rudeness, she didn’t like the idea of leaving him alone when he was like this. When out in the desert, she’d seen a side of him that she was willing to bet very few others ever had. When they had struggled to even just walk into town, she’d seen him in pain. She’d seen him fall. Sith Lords, as far to her knowledge, didn’t let just anyone see them like that and live. It was clear that Vader held her in higher esteem than anyone else, but there was still a limit. He was probably just as frustrated and cranky as she was with their situation and handled it by snapping and being rude. But even while she was beginning to understand it, it didn’t make her feel any better for his treatment of her.

Wandering through the streets, cloak pulled together around her tightly so no one could see her night gown, Padmé searched for a cantina. She’d never been inside a real cantina before, only common bars in the inner Core. But from what she was led to believe, an Outer Rim cantina was quite different than any of the Inner Rim bars. Cantinas were supposed to be rather lawless places, where anyone could get away with an array of illegal things and no one would bat an eyelash. Rumor had it that a being could shoot someone and no one would care. Padmé had always dismissed such stories as just that, stories... But Vader’s insistence that she take his ‘saber made her think twice now.

Eventually, after searching while trying not to look like she was searching, the senator found the entrance of what she assumed had to be the cantina judging by how many drunk men were coming stumbling out. Walking in, keeping her hood up, the young woman suddenly found herself feeling more nervous than she had before. Perhaps Vader had been right to give her his lightsaber.

The cantina was exactly like how they’d shown it on old holos before the censorship of the Empire. It was dirty and dusty, with piles of literal dust on the floors. The inhabitants of the cantina were filthier than their surrounds, all of them weatherworn and leathery. There were a few females, but they were mostly scantily clad things, sitting in the laps of patrons. There was a live band playing rather lively music that contrasted sharply with the looks of the general audience. No one was smiling, save for the women working hard to get a customer, but the band still played on, almost as if on automatic. It was exactly the place where a lady could be easily abducted and no one would ever know what had happened to her. And it was exactly the sort of place that Padmé had never imagined herself going into.

But shoving her fears back, she walked farther into the establishment with purpose, one hand keeping the cloak closed, the other on the lightsaber. No one even gave her a spare glance while she had her hood on, and when she made it to the counter, she waited patiently for the bartender to notice her. That was a mistake. The gruff looking male on the other side didn't seem particularly interested in providing the best customer service. In fact, he watched the band playing with his arms crossed, a look of complete indifference on his face.

Growing uncomfortable with waiting and being here longer than she had to be, at last, Padmé reached over the bar and tugged on his shirt sleeve to get his attention. "Excuse me?"

The male jerked his arm away from her, turning a rather bored scowl her way. He eyed her, but Padmé tried to keep her composure as best as she could. When he didn't speak, she decided that she had better do it or lose his attention. "I'd like some water."

The bartender raised a disgusted eyebrow at her, still waiting, and Padmé realized she was going to have to be a little more specific. "I need however much this can get me," she set the money down on the counter.

At last the male seemed to take some interest as he scooped up the pouch and looked through it with curiosity. "This'll get you five canteens," he said in a gruff, gravely sort of voice.

Around her, other patrons were starting to take some notice of her, and Padmé felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She had to get out of here. "Fine," she nodded. "Just make it quick," she added, trying her best to mimic Vader's impatient tone. Though, she feared her command sounded more like a request compared to his.

The bartender only shrugged before turning away from her. A drunkard at the bar came stumbling over to her, trying to see past her hood. Even though she felt like recoiling and running down the bar to the other side to get away from him, it would probably remind everyone even more that she wasn't from around here, so she stood still. Never in her life had Padmé seen or met such disinterested, rude people. In all her travels before, she'd always met with people who were kind and at least were willing to come up with solutions to be helpful. But then, she'd only ever traveled to places where she was welcomed, places that put value in manners. She was an unwelcomed stranger if the glares she was receiving were any indication, and her manners were probably just as offensive to them as theirs were to her.

The drunk kept up his ridiculous quest to try to look at her face, but Padmé turned her head away, her entire body taunt, ready to spring away or draw the lightsaber. Her finger traced lightly over the button that Vader had indicated earlier. She did not like this situation at all.

"He rrrrr-ip you off," the drunk slurred, leaning heavily against the counter. Padmé took a slight step away from him, not saying a word. "You shouldda gotten a leas'...sev-en canteens." He burped, a horrid smell from it filling the air.

Her life's work was all about negotiation, about making deals, and hearing a drunk in a cantina on some back water planet telling her that she'd been duped made Padmé suddenly feel like screaming. She was tired, thirty, hungry, sore, and scared, and now angry was tacked on to the list. How could she have been so stupid to just trust people here? She'd seen those holos of where Outer Rim merchants and the like would eagerly take advantage of naïve strangers. Granted, she'd always hated those portrayals of people, believing that it had to be

an unjust stereotype, but apparently it was not quite as inaccurate as she'd thought. She should have known better. But then, she still wasn't thinking all too clearly from the crash. Maybe taking Vader would have been wise after all? Or worse, considering she could just imagining him chocking everyone here and taking what he wanted, or mind-tricking them. That would have definitely grabbed a lot of people's attention.

Thinking about it, Padmé wondered if perhaps she should contact someone. They needed help and needed it fast... But who would she call? Tatooine was by all accounts a boondocks sort of planet, and even though her own Naboo was not too far away, it was still far enough that no one remembered their location near this dust ball. She could call her family, but then, she wasn't sure they could come get her. They had money, sure, but what with the celebration go array, it would no doubt be difficult to get a transport from Naboo to Tatooine. In fact, with the recent disaster, she wondered about what sort of rescue team would be out looking for them. They had obviously wandered quite far from Naboo with the battle, maybe they had already traced them here?

For a brief moment she thought about contacting the Alliance, only to remember in horror that that was probably not a good idea. They had tried to shoot her down. Her own friends and allies had tried to kill her. A part of her understood, of course, that desperate times called for desperate measures, that they were probably only doing what they thought was best... but it still hurt. Betrayal was something Padmé was beginning to get accustomed to feeling. It was obvious that the Rebels switched goals throughout the battle and their target had, in fact, been Vader and not herself... but still. They hadn't hesitated, and only Obi-Wan's frantic pleas had been the only support for them when in the battle.

So that left the Imperials. Surely they would be searching for their Supreme Commander if nothing else. Vader practically ran the Empire, his disappearance would not be tolerated long. But did Padmé want to go with them? True, staying here did not appeal to her, but at the same time, neither did being under the Emperor's watchful eye. She would of course be with Vader, but even she knew that a good thing like this couldn't last long. The tension between what Vader felt and what he was ordered to do would soon come into too much conflict, and he would eventually have to make a choice. Either he would stand with her and oppose a direct order that would no doubt not end well for either of them, or he would obey the Emperor—his master—and kill her sooner or later. It was a painful thought, more because of the treachery she felt just thinking about it, but he was a Sith Lord. She had to keep telling herself that. It didn't matter what she felt for him, he was still Vader.

The drunk had apparently passed out while she was musing to herself, and soon the bartender came back with five canteens for her. As she took them, she decided that it wouldn't hurt to ask. "Do you have a long-range communicator?"

The male took on an amused expression before it hardened again. "This look like the Imperial Palace to you, moneybags?" Padmé scowled. "Th' only place with one a' those is the Imperial base in Mos Eisley."

Wasn't that where she was? She remembered Vader telling her the town name, but that had been so long ago. She'd thought it was Mos-something, but apparently this wasn't the right one. So, instead of giving these people anymore reason to stare or insult her, or before she made a bigger fool of herself, the Galactic Senator took her canteens and left. It was difficult

not to walk away quickly, but she didn't want them to get the impression that she was running, even though they probably smelled her fear.

By the time she found her way back to Vader, the suns were slowly but surely sinking down. It had been a rather interesting adventure on the way back, having nearly run in to some beggar who insisted that she owed him something for her rudeness. And as the day cooled, she saw more people coming out, children running around, dusty and dirty. There were more merchants, too, who were much bolder now that the atmosphere cooled, coming up and actually touching her and trying to lead her away in order to get her to buy something.

So by the time she sank down beside the Sith all she wanted to do was cry herself to sleep. It was all beginning to be too much for her. The stress of the last... however long it had really been since the battle to now, was just building up to overwhelm her. She would consider herself a strong person, but even the strongest of people had their weaknesses, had their limits where they just couldn't take it anymore.

A hand on her shoulder startled the young woman from her melancholy thoughts and she jerked away, turning to find herself staring into abnormal purplish eyes. Vader was staring at her, and while his expression was stark, she could tell he wasn't feeling well and he was worried. He was worried not about his injuries or the fact that he was stuck here, but concerned about her.

That was the final straw. He didn't say anything, wasn't really different than before the crash, but he was. She could feel it. Without a second thought, she threw herself against him, on the side that wasn't injured, and just cried. The canteens lay between them uncomfortably, but Padmé didn't care. She wasn't moving. His shock was evident, but what surprised her was that slowly, after a few moments, he allowed his arm to settle over her. It was one of the most familiar gestures he'd ever made towards her when not being intimate.

Their situation looked incredibly bleak, but at least she knew she wouldn't alone.

## 35. Unlikely Rescue

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Across the galaxy, the citizens of the Empire were made to mourn the loss of Lord Darth Vader and Senator Padmé Amidala. The past three days had gone by in a whirlwind, but now, standing beside fellow officers in line, watching as the funeral procession marched by through the streets of the Imperial City, up to the platform where the Emperor himself stood, Firmus decided that the galaxy had finally stopped moving. Not a head was raised as horribly sorrowful music was played over the speakers around the city, and there were a lot of people crying. Even some of the officers had tears in their eyes.

This wasn't due to sadness, Piett knew better than that, it was simply the atmosphere weighing down upon everyone, creating conditions that induced grief so that no one could help but to cry. Too many emotions like this were always a dangerous thing. It made people react without thought. It was the perfect atmosphere for people to say and do very foolish things.

Next to him, Storm Trooper CT-585, or Cory, had his head bowed, a nasty scowl on his face. His arm was still in a sling, but he was none the worse for wear. He'd insisted on attending. Firmus knew the trooper was blaming himself for all of this—Firmus, too, had struggled with guilt—but wished he could make the clone believe that there wasn't anything they could have done. Vader was the one that had rushed off without them, and it was the Rebels who killed the Sith and the senator. But it was always hard to reason with a clone when they got an idea into their head.

Despite there being thousands of beings all crammed together, Coruscant seemed abnormally still as the Emperor gave his eulogy. The traffic had been rerouted away from the palace, making the sky look unnaturally bare and still, and there was so little noise it sent a chill up the young man's spine. Only the Emperor's voice rang through Coruscant as he reached out to his mourning citizens across the galaxy.

His words were fire. Never before had Piett felt so... moved by what anyone had ever said. It was like the Emperor knew exactly what he was feeling, knew how angry, shocked, and overall confused he was. It was as though the message had been written specifically with him in mind. Glancing over at Cory, Firmus knew the trooper felt the same. A part of the young man knew that it must be those Sith powers Vader had warned him about, like the old Jedi-mind tricks he'd heard rumors about as a child.

But even knowing that the Emperor was trying to manipulate him, Firmus gave himself up to the message. It was not because he was weak willed, but because he agreed. There was a lot that he didn't agree with within the Empire, that's why he'd taken to Vader's plans to begin with, wanting to help create a better galaxy. But at the moment, the Rebels were a bigger threat than the Emperor. They created chaos in the otherwise ordered galaxy. They would have to get rid of this outside threat before anyone could work more diligently on the internal problems.

And so, with his heart burning with righteous fervor, spurred on by not only by the Emperor's words, but from the sorrow of the loss of a leader and a friend, Firmus vowed to



do whatever it took to avenge Vader and Amidala. He had his power and position, and he intended to use it.

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It had been three days since waking up from the crash, and still no one had come to save them. The rather bleak situation that Padmé and Vader had found themselves in had only got worse. For starters, Vader's wounded side had gotten infected, and the sickly Sith worsened by the day. The spunk that he'd been able to maintain evaporated alarmingly quickly, like water in this barren land, and eventually he was left with a fever, falling in and out of consciousness. He didn't make much sense when he spoke, if he spoke at all now. She couldn't get him to eat, could barely get him to drink, and she was beginning to fear for his life.

No one bothered to help them either, which shocked Padmé. Beings walked by, saw them huddled up against their building in their little patch of shade, but said nothing. Most didn't even look at them. A few times she'd gotten up and tried to ask for help, but she only received glares, sometimes rude comments, before being dismissed completely. No one cared here. Genuinely, no one cared.

The nights on Tatooine were chilly, the days blazing, and it wasn't doing Vader any good. By the third day she was desperate. "E-excuse me," she called after someone. They didn't even pause.

A Rodian male was walking by, and Padmé decided to try again, reaching out to him. "Pardon me, sir, but could you just—"

The green creature sent a pointed glare at her, before rushing off before she could touch him. No one cared. And it infuriated the senator.

Something needed to be done, and so, chancing to leave her wounded companion, taking his lightsaber with her—the only thing of value they had—Padmé decided to walk farther into the town. Mos Espa, she'd learned the name rather quickly from passersby who appeared to be on the planet for business only. So, at least armed with a 'saber and the better knowledge of how to handle herself here after being on the wrong end of some rather rude creatures, she took a chance. She didn't like leaving Vader alone, but as he'd said before, and as she'd witnessed herself, there was a very good chance that no one would even see him sitting there. No one would bother with a dying man.

There weren't many people out in the heat of the day, but that's what Padmé wanted. It was the crowds she'd seen that scared her. After only a few days, she'd seen a lot of theft, harassment, and just general cruelty to turn her off of unnecessary socializing, if one could call it that. She was truly beginning to see why so many people looked down on the Outer Rim. If other Outer Rim worlds were like Tatooine, they were virtual hell-holes.

Eventually, however, the heat became too much for Padmé as well, and she knew she had to find some shade. Without much thought, she found herself wandering into the nearest building just to get out of the sun for a moment. No sooner had she gone in than she heard a greasy voice welcome her.

"Hi chuba da naga?"

Startled, Padmé turned to find herself staring at a blue Toydarian. He was an ill-tempered looking creature, and so she decided not to keep him waiting. “I was wondering if you might be able to help me,” she began carefully, relieved that she seemed to have come into some sort of parts store.

The Toydarian looked her up and down, an obvious sneer on his lips, before he turned away, flapping back to wherever he’d come from. “Nothing in here is free,” he grunted.

And of course he was just like everyone else on this miserable planet. Vaguely, she heard someone else entering into the junk shop. But before the creature could speak to them, welcome them as bluntly as he had her, Padmé had decided that she was tired of being ignored. She was a former queen of a planet and a current Galactic Senator, for Force sake! She deserved some respect!

“I just want to know if there is a doctor or a medical facility nearby,” she insisted, inserting herself in front of the creature. “My friend and I were in a horrible crash an—”

“That’s a new one,” the Toydarian crossed his arms in a bored fashion. But before Padmé could voice her confusion, he carried on. “Come up with a better sob story and maybe you could get some foreigners to fall for it,” he sneered as he fluttered away, close to the new customers that had entered his shop.

This entire planet was nothing but one shock after another, deceiving in its bland exterior. He thought that this was some kind of con? That she would make herself look like this on her own free will? What sort of planet was this?

Losing her patience, just snapping, Padmé marched over to the creature, who was helping a young man who appeared to be looking at some parts, before cutting in between them. She wasn’t giving up that easily. Throwing back her hood, she opened her cloak to him. “Does it look like I’m making this up?” she demanded. “I crashed here without warning. I’m in my nightgown, for Force sake! I’ve been sitting outside a building for three days surviving on a few mouthfuls of water and some emergency rations while my companion is out there dying! Doesn’t that mean anything to you? Don’t you care?!”

For all her passion, for all her yelling, the young man and the Toydarian just looked at one another, before the human looked away, muttering something about looking on a different shelf before turning away. The flying creature, instead, smirked a mean sort of smirk, before itching his foot with his other. “You’re really committing, huh?” he chuckled darkly. “Thanks for the show, but shove off.”

And with that, Senator Padmé Amidala was dismissed without another thought. Defeat settled over her bitterly, and before she could make a fool of herself any further, she turned and stormed out of the junk shop, not caring about the heat anymore. In fact, she didn’t care about much of anything. Not even that she nearly plowed over a woman as she limped away. She just plain didn’t give a poodoo about these people. For the first time in her life, Padmé wished ill on an entire planet.

When she made it back to Vader, he appeared worse than when she’d left, probably because the suns had reached their peak and the heat was at its height. She sighed, sinking down beside him, feeling his forehead. He really wasn’t doing well. She wished she could have gotten him some medicine when they’d had some money. But then, as she was slowly

beginning to suspect, Mos Espa probably didn't have a medical center. In fact, she was willing to bet that there wasn't even a real doctor, or at least not one that would help crash survivors without being offered some sort of currency. With what she was learning of these people, the doctor would probably just dismiss her anyway and want more money than was reasonable. In the end, it had probably been for the best that she'd just gotten water instead of trying to get any sort of help.

As time went on, Padmé was actually beginning to see that it wasn't so difficult to believe that Vader had lived on this planet. The Sith's cruel detachment fit in quite nicely here. His blunt manner was reflected perfectly in the people, and his distrust of the area when they'd first come here made perfect sense now. It was easy to understand his natural distrust of everyone, too. Maybe there had been something to Vader's opinions of ruling the galaxy if he'd had to live here. Tatooine certainly wasn't a shining example of the virtue and goodness that lingered within the galaxy.

Tatooine was a rather corrupt place from what she'd seen. In the past several days she'd seen beings— children and adults— steal from local vendors. There had been blaster shots fired not too far from where they were the other day, and screaming, but no one else had even bothered to go see what was happening. And worse of all, even though it didn't make any sense to her, she'd seen slaves. Officially the Empire's stance was to ban all slavery, even though she knew it existed on some planets. It was always hidden and overseen with strict supervision. Here, slaves were not hidden, but walked openly among the free population. Really, she wouldn't have realized they were slaves until she'd seen one man beat another, screaming at him for no real reason. In horror, she'd listened to the one curse ever having, "wasted good money" on the other.

No, it wasn't so very hard to imagine Darth Vader living in such a harsh world. He'd told her once that he didn't care what people thought of him, didn't care if they hated him, as long as they obeyed. As long as they feared. He'd told her that fear was the only thing that kept the masses in line, that they would listen to nothing else. And now having been to a planet such as this, to be outside of the elite circle, Padmé could see how such opinions could be formed. In fact, she was starting to believe them on some level. Tatooine was just such a... a horrible planet. She could muster no other opinion of it.

Looking back over at her companion, Vader was slouched and leaning against the building, appearing wholly wretched. With a sigh, she took what little water they had left and forced him to drink. Since his mouth was slack, the difficult part was helping him swallow. But somewhere deep in his subconscious he must have realized what was happening, because eventually, he sat up just a bit and drank. He was weak and in rough shape, but it was heartening to know that he wasn't completely lifeless.

Padmé was about to take a drink herself when she noticed a figure standing a little ways away, watching them. Instinctively, she reached for her weapon, suddenly quite afraid that she'd have to use the lightsaber to defend herself and Vader. But instead, the figure held up their hands in the universal gesture of peace. "Please, I-I won't harm you."

The voice belonged to that of a woman, and true enough, when the figure stepped forward, pulling down the hood, the face of a young woman appeared. Staring up into warm blue eyes, the first caring face Padmé had so far seen here on the desert world, almost made her cry. There was such an air of kindness coming from the young woman that should she turn out to

be anything but good, it would break the senator. Nothing about this planet stood up to her ideas about the galaxy, it would be devastating to know that she couldn't even read people anymore.

When the young woman stopped in front of them, she slowly knelt down, making sure to keep her movements smooth. When she was finally kneeling, pitying blue eyes looked over Vader, a sad expression on her face. "He really does look bad," the woman muttered.

Slowly, warily, Padmé nodded. Her expression must have given her away, because the other woman smiled rather ruefully. "I won't harm you," she repeated. 'I was in the junk shop when you were trying to get help,' she explained. "I... I followed you here to see if what you were saying was true."

This was the woman that she'd almost run into. Padmé had been so angry and distraught she hadn't even realized or taken note of what the two other people in the building had looked like. It wasn't really like her, but then, she hadn't quite been her normal self for some time.

The senator didn't say anything in return. What was she supposed to say? So far everyone here on this planet was only looking out for themselves, and even though this woman seemed kind, she just couldn't allow herself to hope that help might finally be on its way.

"Will you help us?" The question escaped before Padmé could have stopped it, but at the same time, she was glad it was out. Tatooine bred blunt sort of individuals, and the senator was quickly learning that in order to function here, one had to learn native speech. At least now that she'd asked the question, she could get a direct answer and wouldn't be left wondering and nervously waiting and hoping.

The blue-eyed woman gave her a sad look before standing up. "I'll be right back," she said softly.

A rush of panic came over Padmé as she watched the woman walk away, but she didn't dare move. The woman said she'd be back, but then, would she really? What if she just didn't want Padmé following her? So far no one on this planet had given her any reason to trust or think better of them, so it wouldn't be too much of a surprise should this seemingly kind girl abandon them. Although, it's not like the blonde had promised to do anything, really.

A sigh escaped the senator before she knew it was even coming. Resting her head on her knees, Padmé tried to calm herself. Turning to look up at her companion, she couldn't help the surge of compassion and sadness that came over her. So young, and in such bad shape. He hadn't spoken to her a total count of one hundred words since coming to Tatooine, but just being able to look at him made the senator feel like she knew him so much better. And yet... the enigma that was Darth Vader was still completely intact. She still didn't know why he'd worn the suit, how he came to be in the service of Palpatine, or even his proper age. And his age only brought with it all the more questions. What was an essential boy doing ruling the galaxy as a Sith Lord? And when would he have had time to live on Tatooine?

Reaching up, she petted his cheek, despairing at how warm he felt. His skin was coated in dust and sand, too, sticking to his sweat. His eyes were still tightly closed, though she knew he was dreaming. She could see his eyes moving under the lids frantically. She murmured sweet nothings, hoping to calm his agitation as he'd flinch and jump in his sleep. If there was anything she could've done, Padmé would've done it, but as it was, there was nothing she

could do. She'd never felt so useless in her life. Not for the first time in the past three days, she wished she had his healing powers. At least then she could sooth him.

The sound of voices drawing near took Padmé from her thoughts and she looked up to see the young woman returning. With her was the young man from the junk shop, and even the Toydarian. Hope once again sprang in the senator's chest.

"Well, waddya know," the Toydarian chuckled a thick, oily laugh. "He looks not so good, I think."

The young woman scowled over at the flying creature before she knelt down next to Padmé again, offering a small smile. "What happened?"

"O-our ship crashed," Padmé began the tale again, slowly, wondering how much she should reveal to these people. Probably not much. 'We crashed in the desert and walked into town three days ago. My companion,' she gestured to Vader, who seemed to be stirring, "was injured in the crash and his wound's infected."

The human male seemed uncomfortable with the entire situation, and kept looking back over his shoulder, as if he was nervous someone would catch him out here, or what he was doing was illegal. The Toydarian, however, came closer, much to Padmé's disgust, and poked Vader with the cane he'd brought. "Stop that!" Padmé snapped, waving her hand at him, trying to get him to fly away like some sort of insect.

It had little effect. Instead, the blue creature itched under his chin as he stared down thoughtfully at Vader. "He's a big thing, isn't he?" he muttered, almost to himself. "Missing an arm, scars, but strong looking. And young."

The humans turned to glare at the creature in equaling degrees of confusion. Except the man. His glare quickly turned into a furious scowl. Padmé wished she had Vader's ability to read minds, but she had a pretty good feeling that she wouldn't like whatever this creature was thinking.

At that moment, as if sensing the crowd, the Dark Lord of the Sith peeled open his eyes for the first time since the day before. At first Padmé was concerned with what he might do if he imaged they were being threatened. Sick and slowly dying or not, he was still Darth Vader, and Padmé had seem too many astounding things from him, heard too many stories, to believe for one moment that he was not still dangerous now. It was always the injured beasts that were typically the most dangerous.

But instead of Force choking anyone, the Sith seemed completely out of it, until his eyes caught sight of the Toydarian. Almost instantly, the purplish eyes snapped into focus as he eyed the creature. A minute passed as the two just stared at one another, and for the first time since seeing him, the Toydarian appeared uncomfortable under the intense gaze. Good, Padmé thought unkindly.

But eventually, the clear gaze became unfocused and Vader took a deep breath and closed his eyes again. The flying creature gave a slight chuckle, before shaking his head, as though finding something amusing. "Spunk, even when dying." Not sure what to do, Padmé just scowled. Itching his foot with the other, the Toydarian nodded to himself before turning to look at the senator. "I'll give you one hundred for him."

For a moment, Padmé didn't think she heard right. But as his steady, beady eyes continued to look over Vader, the senator realized what he'd just offered her. Yet, even though she understood on some level what was going on, a part of her rebelled and couldn't wrap her mind around the situation. "What?" The question came out so fast and confused and disgusted it was a wonder anyone understood it at all.

Beside the Toydarian, the young man's scowl blackened. "So now you're in the market for wounded slaves?" he spat, his voice as harsh as the sands around them. "What about wh—"

"Hey, I'm in the market for good deals," the flying creature scowled right back, pointing his cane at the human. 'He's in pretty bad shape, but I think I could turn a profit with him, even if I have to get medicine. Besides,' he turned to gaze down at Padmé who was still having trouble understanding what was going on, "you need money, I think. It's more than a fair deal. No one else in town would make you such an offer, I can promise you that! What do you say?"

"No!" Padmé cried in revulsion.

"Come on!" the Toydarian grinned. "You need money, I'm willing to negotiate."

"No!"

"She doesn't want your deal," the young man snapped, puffing up in anger, even as Vader's eyes opened again, staring blankly at everyone around him. "You can just get out of here."

That seemed to be the wrong thing to say. "Eh, I would be carefully if I were you boy. It's not wise to get the deal you're haggling with mad. My price just went up."

The woman's eyes widened, but her companion didn't back down as he crossed his arms severely, not unlike Vader. "I don't care," he responded boldly. "Deal's off."

That seemed to actually surprise the Toydarian before his scowl darkened. "You can't mean that," he snapped.

"I'll get it from a different dealer," the young man sneered.

The blue creature laughed forebodingly. "Sure you will. I'm the only one in town that's got it!" he smiled easily.

"Owen," the young woman muttered, looking up with a troubled expression. Apparently whatever they'd come for was important, and now, because of Padmé, they weren't going to get it. The senator wanted to speak up, to tell the young man not to worry about them, but then she knew that damage had already been done. It was a matter of male-pride now, and from the stubborn look on the young man's face—this Owen—he'd rather walk away empty handed than make a deal with the Toydarian now.

"Then we'll do without," he said confidently, ignoring the woman, and staring down his nose at the junk dealer.

"You can't mean that!"

"Just get outta here," the young man turned away, focusing now on his companion, who was still kneeling before Padmé and Vader. The other woman, too, looked away, taking cue

from her friend, before offering a shaky smile at Padmé, who couldn't find it within her to smile back.

The Toydarian growled, it sounding more like a gurgling choke than anything else. "Fine. See if I care. I can sell those power converters to anyone in town! And who knows when a new shipment will come in!" he cried, before flying away.

Padmé was about to let out a breath of relief, glad the creature was gone, when Vader's eyes widened, and he sat up so quickly, it startled the other three humans. "Wait!" he cried, reaching out his good hand.

The creature stopped, turned around instinctively, before glaring at the sick man. They all waited a moment, just watching Vader as his chest heaved with exhaustion, as he reached out weakly to the other being. Padmé couldn't help how her heart twisted in sympathy at his panicked expression, but was quickly taken back when the Sith Lord whispered one heart-breaking word: "Mom...?"

As Padmé sat thunderstruck, the Toydarian threw back his head and laughed, crying something in a language the senator did not know. But from Owen's flushed, angry face, she imagined it wasn't anything too civil. "Come find me when you're ready to get rid of him, eh?" he said to Padmé with a laugh before flying off.

"That lousy flying little—"

"Owen," the woman interrupted, standing up and putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Someone really ought to teach that little bastard a lesson one day," the young man snapped. "I don't know why I ever went to him in the first place," he fumed.

There was an awkward pause that settled over the group, and Padmé filled it with trying to sooth Vader and get him to lean back. The Sith, though, seemed frozen in place, staring off in the direction that the horrid little creature had gone, with an uncharacteristic lost expression on his face. It was lucky that Padmé had gotten used to being surprised by the Sith, or she was sure she'd just be sitting there with her jaw dropped. She certainly never expected Darth Vader to call for his mother, but then, she'd never expected to ever see what he looked like, either.

"I suppose you want to take them home?"

The question jolted the senator from her musings, and she stared up at the two standing over her. "Yes," the woman nodded, smiling slightly.

The man groaned. "Beru... I don't know. My dad's gunna kill me when we come home empty handed as it is. Can you imagine what he'd say if we brought home these two?"

"I think your dad would be proud of you," Beru replied confidently, giving Padmé not only the hope she'd desperately been needing, but restoring her faith in humanity.

Owen stared at the blonde for a long moment, before turning his attention back to the two virtual refugees. A sigh escaped him. "And what's your names then?"

Taking a shaky breath, Padmé answered as confidently as she could, "Dormé. And this is... Arlo," she pointed to Vader, saying the first name that came to mind.

Slowly, the couple nodded, before Beru turned a more cheerful smile Owen's way. Again, the young man sighed. "I'll get the speeder," he muttered before turning and walking away.

Once out of sight, Beru smiled kindly down at Padmé. "Don't worry," she said smoothly. "He's just frazzled from dealing with Watto. They don't like each other very much."

"I see," the senator replied dryly, not quite able to keep her tone completely interested.

"We'll take you back to the farm," the other woman went on, either not hearing Padmé's accidental rudeness or not taking offense. "We don't have a lot of medical equipment, but we have more than you're gunna find if you stay here."

"Thank you," Padmé replied sincerely, showing her gratitude and relief in a small smile.

Beru's smile only sweetened as she stood up, looking around. A moment later, Owen came driving up in a worn, but decent looking land speeder. As he got out, he opened the back door, preparing it for his guests and clearing seats for them. When he was finished, he came to stand before the group again, looking down at Vader apprehensively. "Do you think he can stand on his own?"

"I don't know," the brunette replied honestly. 'Vader,' she whispered, talking into his ear, hoping sense would come back to him. "Vader, please. I've found help. Can you stand? We need to get out of here."

The Sith was still staring into nothingness, and just when Padmé thought he didn't understand, he snapped his attention to her. His eyes, which had been getting a lighter purple over the past few days, were suddenly very dark purple, reddish, almost like she'd seen them when on the shuttle. Unconsciously, a shiver ran down her spine.

Scowling blackly, Vader began the painful looking task of heaving himself up. Instantly, the other three were at his side, helping him rise. Again, a part of Padmé couldn't help but be impressed with how much he weighed. He looked so skinny without his usual armor, but then, looks were very deceiving.

Standing proved to be all the Sith could accomplish, and Padmé felt a surge of frustration from him. There was still a part of him conscious enough to understand what was going on, the first sign she'd felt in a while, and he didn't like his newfound weakness. Knowing what a truly frustrated, angry Vader could do, Padmé decided to coo and encourage him as they all but dragged him the short distance to the speeder.

When they finally made it, Vader all but fell into the seat, panting and sweating a lot more than what was normal. The other three had to stop and rest, out of breath themselves. "How big... is he?" Owen asked, turning an almost incredulous expression on Padmé.

Blushing slightly, though she didn't really know why, she responded, "About two meters or so."

Owen snorted even as Beru let out a tired giggle. "Seems about right," the blonde smiled.

Rolling his eyes, Owen stood upright and gentler than Padmé would have thought possible for the gruff man, put Vader's feet into the vehicle and straightened him into proper position before closing the door. When that was done, he helped Padmé into the other backseat before closing the door for her. He did the same for Beru in the front seat before getting in himself.



Such manners seemed completely out of place here on Tatooine, but it made the senator smile.

And with only a, “Here we go,” from Owen, they were off.

It took a moment for what had happened to settle in, but when it did, Padmé found herself leaning slightly into Vader, tears standing out in her eyes. “We’ll be okay,” she whispered to the now completely unconscious Sith, dearly hoping she was right, but knowing her options were extremely limited. “We’re okay.”

## 36. The Lars'

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The ride through the Tatooine desert was much more enjoyable than the death march she and Vader had taken several days before, Padmé decided. While Owen and Beru's speeder didn't have anything as wonderful as an air cooling unit installed, going as fast as they were created a pleasant enough breeze. It was tangling Padmé hair terribly, but at the moment, she didn't care. Anything that cooled the blasted heat was welcomed. She just hoped the trip wouldn't last too much longer.

The suns were beginning to set by the time they came to a stop outside of a small, round looking building. It confused Padmé at first, until she realized that they must live primarily underground. Very smart considering the heat. She hadn't asked what kind of farmers they were, but it didn't really matter she supposed. It seemed like a waste of time to her, though, to be a farmer of any sort here. There was just nothing on Tatooine except course, terrible people and sand.

As they began getting out of the vehicle, they puzzled on how they were going to get Vader inside since he'd passed out completely and would be of no help. Padmé was about to suggest that they just figure out a way to carry him themselves, distributing the weight as best as they could, when a gravelly voice startled her. "What the hell's goin' on here?"

Turning around, all three young adults found themselves staring into the frowning face of an older man. He had a scraggly looking beard, and walked with a slight limp. While his expression was hard, he didn't seem like a bad sort of person, at least to Padmé, but merely a rough sort that had adapted to his surroundings. She didn't have to worry about explaining herself, however, because Owen stepped forward immediately.

"Dad," he said quickly, before pausing, as if lost for what to say. "They needed help," he settled on after a moment.

The older man frowned more, and Padmé decided to step up. "Hello," she smiled diplomatically holding out her hand, which he took immediately in his firm grip. 'I'm Dormé and this is Arlo,' she pointed to Vader, whose head was lulled backwards, mouth slightly opened. She knew it would pain him to be seen like this by anyone, but it couldn't be helped. "We were in a terrible crash, and your son was kind enough to offer us assistance."

Or at least she hoped Owen was his son. Her new companions hadn't really explained their relationship to one another, or this place, but from what she'd gathered from before, she'd thought Owen talked about his father not liking this. From looks alone, Padmé decided that this man and Owen looked quite similar. And if she had to guess, she'd bet that Beru was some sort of close friend or possibly a significant other to Owen. But she supposed she'd learn more about these people eventually.

The old man stared at Padmé, looking her up and down, before turning his attention to the unconscious Sith. Raising an eyebrow, he looked back at Owen, who shrugged slightly, before nodding. "Cliegg Lars. You're both welcome here."

“Thank you,” Padmé bowed her head gratefully, unable to fully express how happy she was that things were starting to look up at last.

“Well,” the old farmer muttered after a pause. “We best get him inside. Owen, help me lift him.”

“He’s too big for just two people,” the younger Lars admitted, rushing to his father’s side, helping him open the door to the speeder. “We’ll need everyone to help.”

“It’ll just have to be the four of us,” Cliegg sighed, frowning. “He’s a big one, isn’t he?”

Padmé couldn’t help the small smile that formed on her lips. If only they knew who this really was, perhaps they wouldn’t be so shocked by the Sith’s size. But then, they probably would have died of a heart attack knowing that they were helping the Second of the Galaxy. Or perhaps they wouldn’t help at all. Darth Vader was not particularly liked in most regions of the galaxy, after all.

But knowing that they were right, and glad for the extra pair of hands, the four of them managed to get Vader out of the speeder and down the stairs to the living area of the family. They were all sweating and panting by the time they reached a common room and had to pause a moment, their limbs shaking from the strain. But the men refused to give up, and kept driving them forward until they made it to a small back room. It looked like it was carved out of the rock, just like the rest of the house, and it was set apart a bit from the rest of the rooms, or as far as Padmé could tell. There was a bed pressed against the fall wall, and all four of them rushed over to dispose of their burden as carefully as possible upon it.

As they all stretched and panted, Padmé almost groaned in exasperation. “The bed’s... too short,” she muttered.

“I’ll go get a chair,” Beru said quickly, rushing out, leaving Padmé alone with the two men.

Feel a little awkward and uncomfortable, they stared at one another for a few seconds before Cliegg decided words were in order. “Ship crashed, you said?”

“Yes. Out in the desert.”

The farmer nodded. “Heard report from one of the neighbors about seeing something fall the other night. Couldda been your ship.” Not knowing how to respond, the senator remained quiet. “What’s wrong with him?” he went on, pointing to Vader.

“A wounded side,” she explained carefully. “And perhaps other more minor injuries.”

“His arm’s missing,” Owen frowned.

“He... was missing that before our recent crash.”

“Any chance that’s infected too?” Cliegg asked.

“No,” Padmé replied confidently.

The two men nodded. “You don’t look so good yourself,” the older Lars pointed out. It was blunt, but by now the senator realized he was not being rude, simply to the point. He was concerned.

Padmé smiled tiredly. She'd barely thought of her own injuries since Vader had fallen desperately ill. "All minor, I assure you," she said gently. "Thank you again for your help and hospitality. You don't know how much this means to me. And I swear I'll pay you back one day when—"

"Ah," Cliegg waved her off. "I don't wanna hear any talk of payment. Folks gotta help each other out, out here, after all. Makes the world a little bit of a better place, don't it?"

The senator smiled warmly. "I think so. Thank you."

The old man nodded back, just a hint of a smile on his face before he turned to his son. "Why don't you go get her the medical supplies so she can help her friend." Owen nodded and rushed out. "I'll be right back," he muttered, before turning and leaving Padmé alone with her lover.

Sitting down on the bed beside the Sith, the young woman sighed, unable to believe how cool it was in the house. She looked down at Vader's now sunburnt face and petted his cheek. He didn't look well, but she had no doubt he'd be looking better in a few hours thanks to the Lars. Perhaps in a couple of days they would be able to get out of here, go to Mos Eisley or wherever that bartender had said, and call for help. But then, she didn't exactly know who to call. She was still trying to figure that part out.

It was a problem to be thought through later. At that moment, Beru came back in with a chair and some pillows. Carefully, the two women set to work pulling off Vader's boots, which caused him to groan, before carefully arranging his feet on top of the pillows on the chair. The blonde woman smiled over at the senator and shook her head. "I can't imagine having been stranded in Mos Espa for three days with him like this. You must have done a wonderful job taking care of him."

Padmé shook her head, not sure how to take the praise. "I didn't really do anything," she admitted. "He's just stubborn."

Beru laughed lightly. "Owen's much the same," she responded with fondness, confirming the other woman's suspicions.

"I'm sorry to pry but is Owen your...?" she trailed off, leaving it open for the blonde to answer or not.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I should've realized," the young woman gave a sheepish smile. "Owen's my husband. We got married recently. And... Arlo...?"

"He's..." Padmé trailed off, not quite sure how to answer the other woman. She could lie, make up something, but she didn't want to. She didn't like lying to people, even when it was necessary, and if it hadn't been for Beru, she was sure they would still be sitting outside that building in Mos Espa. "He's just my... he's... umm..."

The other woman laughed lightly, putting her hand on top of Padmé's in a familiar, knowing gesture. Padmé looked up into sparkling blue eyes. "I understand," she said simply.

At that moment, both Owen and Cliegg returned. Beru smiled at her again, before helping her husband set out the medical supplies on the little table beside the bed, while Cliegg limped over to the senator. "Here's some clothes for you, Miss."

Taking the clothes gratefully, Padmé smiled at Cliegg. “Thank you.”

“Maybe you’d like a sonic shower first?” Beru suggested.

Just the word ‘shower’ sounded like the most beautiful word to Padmé. Even if it wasn’t a water shower, to get all the dirt and sand off of her sounded heavenly. But then she felt guilty. Looking down at Vader, she knew his wounds had to be taken care of first.

“Maybe after I see to him.”

“You can wash your hands here,” Owen pointed out a small sink just outside the door.

Padmé nodded and quickly set to washing her hand and up her arms in the sonic, pushing up the cloak as best as she could. She was a little embarrassed to be seen in her nightgown, but then, she had a feeling that neither Cliegg nor Owen were judging her. They were simple, down to earth sorts as far as she could tell; humble. They understood her circumstance. At last she had found her wholesome, rustic people on Tatooine!

When she was finished washing up, she noticed Beru behind her. “I’ll wash up and help you,” the other woman offered.

Padmé nodded gratefully. “Thank you. I... don’t really know what else to say.”

The blonde just smiled sweetly. As the senator re-enter the room, she saw the two Lars men staring down at Vader, identical thoughtful expressions on their faces. When she came and sat down beside her companion, Cliegg pointed at the Sith, “How old is he?”

There was only curiosity in the older man’s voice, but at the same time, Padmé didn’t know how best to answer. It seemed strange that she didn’t know such a thing considering how long she and the Sith had known each other, but then, one didn’t just sit down and ask Lord Vader personal questions. “I... I’m not completely sure,” she admitted.

The two men nodded, even as Beru came in and gave Padmé a discrete look. It wasn’t condemning, simply inquisitive. “Just the captain of your ship, then?” Cliegg asked.

“Well... sort of...” Not wanting these good people to think ill of her, the senator found herself desperate to explain without having to really explain or lie. “You see, we were just... sort of... thrown together for a while and... well... i-it’s complicated,” she finished lamely.

The Lars family gave her varying degrees of amusement, before the patriarch shook his head. “We’ll leave you two ladies to it, then. If you need somethin’ just holler.”

Owen, who Padmé was beginning to suspect was a little more stern than his father, gave his guests another once over, the slightest hint of distrust playing around his eyes, before he left with his father. In all honesty, Padmé didn’t blame him. From what she’d seen of the people on Tatooine, one couldn’t be too careful here. Cliegg, too, looked the be a wary sort, but had apparently softened a bit with age. Owen had yet to learn all the lessons his father had.

And so, with just Beru beside her, Padmé took a deep breath and began the task of helping Vader. Knowing that she had to clean and actually look at the wound, she set about trying to get his shirt off. The entire process was awkward and uncomfortable for her, though she knew it shouldn’t be. She’d slept with this man, for Force sake! But never once had she seen him naked, nor had she ever gotten the real pleasure of taking his clothes off. Just the thought of

undressing Darth Vader left her a little squeamish, even though she told herself there was no reason for it. But, stealing herself to see the infection, she was once again not fully prepared for what she saw as she removed his shirt.

Scars. Everywhere. Beside her, Beru gasped slightly, even as Padmé sat staring in numb silence. The young man's body was littered with scars of varying shapes and sizes. Some deep, others more shallow. There were angry red scratches and burn marks from the crash, yet there were also older marks that looked to have been healing from before. Were they from his fight with Jedi? It was hard to imagine anything hurting Darth Vader at all.

More notably, however, was the large, roundish scar just under the Sith's left breast. It looked very deep, and even though she didn't really want to know, a morbid curiosity came over her, and she turned the Sith over ever so slightly to see a matching scar on his back. He'd been stabbed clean through. Suddenly it wasn't so very mysterious as to why he'd worn the suit. He must have had extensive lung damage.

"Oh Force," Beru breathed in horror, and it was only then that Padmé realized what she was looking at.

If Vader's torso was scarred, his back was all but mutilated. There were far more scars on his back, the majority of them looking like lashes from a whip, crisscrossing over and over again until the skin turned into one big scar over another. A part of Padmé died, the innocence within her that had always believed that Darth Vader was nothing more than a power-hungry tyrant that didn't understand the pain he was inflicting upon others. Staring down at him, she realized he understood. He understood perfectly well the suffering he caused, because it appeared he'd endure the same sorts of torments.

A slave, Palpatine had called his heir, and it was only now that Padmé fully understood what he'd meant. Vader wasn't just a slave metaphorically, Vader was Palpatine's slave. There was no one in the galaxy that could harm Darth Vader, no one who the Sith would allow to touch him... except the Emperor. His master. It wasn't just a title of respect for a teacher, Vader must have meant it literally just as much as symbolically. Palpatine owned Vader. That had to be it. No one else could hurt Vader like this and get away with it.

A sudden memory sprang into the senator's mind of just before they'd left for Naboo. Although she hadn't been sure how or why, she'd felt that Vader had been... hurt somehow. He'd been distant, moody, and in the back of her brain, she'd known he'd been hurting. Before they'd left, he'd gone to see the Emperor several times. That's when he must have gotten these older wounds. The Emperor had tortured him.

A deep disgust filled Padmé as she thought of all of her interactions with the Emperor and Vader. When she'd first been taken to the palace before given over to Vader, she'd almost wondered if the younger Sith had been a droid by the absolute loyalty and obedience he'd shown Palpatine. There had been deep respect and emotional detachment from Vader when before the Emperor. She'd thought it was because the younger Sith had been brainwashed by Palpatine's teachings wholly, she never considered that it could be because it was beaten into him, and for fear of abuse, he obeyed.

Let them hate, as long as they fear. Vader's words once more rang in her ears. It wasn't just an ideology with him, it was his life. Vader was tortured by the Emperor, his master. The Sith before her couldn't be more than twenty or so, and would have had to have been a teenager at

the formation of the Empire, which meant that he would have had to have gotten in with Palpatine sometime before that. These scars were not new. They were not just a tribute to the four years of the Empire. These would have to have been a collection of five or more years. Vader must know what it is to fear and hate, and he was a testament to how such cruel tactics led to obedience. He believed that such a system would work because he had lived it.

This, of course, was all speculation, and Padmé was making leaps and bounds in her thinking, but something told her she was not wrong. Something told her that she was so very close to finally cracking the shell of what was Darth Vader. If only he was awake to answer her questions...

"Force, what... what happened to him?" Beru's horrified question brought the senator from her thoughts.

Peering down at the complex, young man before her with nothing but pity, Padmé answered simply, "He's had a very hard life."

The blonde didn't appear satisfied with the answer, but also didn't pry. Instead, she nodded her head, before helping the senator turn the Sith onto his back. Together they looked at his wounded side, and began cleaning it and any of the other cuts and burns.

It was silent work. While cleaning the Sith, Padmé couldn't help the tears that came to her eyes once more. So young, but so twisted and abused. And she hadn't helped matters. These injuries she was cleaning now were because of her. She hadn't really been injured because Vader had protected her, had shielded her with his own body. These burns and cuts were because he'd wanted to keep her safe. He'd thrown himself over her without a second thought about what it could, would do to him. It was humbling and terrible to know that she could inspire such feeling from the Sith Lord.

As they managed to turn him onto his stomach to clean the wounds on this back, once more the senator was greeted by the mangled sight. It nearly made her gag. It was appalling to look at. She's touched him before, how had she not noticed these scars? Had she really been into the moment or had she simply not noticed because she hadn't known for sure if he was even human or not? With so many species in the galaxy, not all had the same skin texture. She'd just been happy to find out that he'd had hair, she'd forgotten to really feel the texture of his skin.

Once the minor wounds were tended and bacta patches were placed over the more severe wounds, they turned their attention to his side. It was obvious that something had impaled him partially from the crash. It was oozing putrid, yellow puss from the infection and had been crusted over with sand. Now that it was clean, the area all around the wound was an angry red, glaring up at them. In silent tandem the two women did their best to patch up the wound without harming their patient further. Vader, however, didn't move.

When the task of caring for Vader was complete, Beru turned worried eyes upon the senator. "Do you have any injuries like that?" she asked softly.

"No," Padmé smiled weakly. "The worst was a sprained ankle."

"Are you sure?" the blonde insisted. "I can help clean any wounds you have."

"I'm all right," the other insisted. "Really. I think... I think I want to take that shower now, though."

Beru nodded. "I'll show you where it is."

"Wait," Padmé hesitated, looking down at Vader, biting her bottom lip. "Do you mind... sitting with him while I'm showering? I don't... I don't want him left alone anymore."

"Of course not," the other woman smiled warmly. "Come with me."

Grabbing the bundle of clothes that Cliegg had given to her, Padmé followed the other woman out the door and to the 'fresher. Once there, Beru showed her how everything worked, before leaving her alone to wash up after the senator thanked her again.

When she was alone, able to breathe for the first time in what felt like too long, Padmé carefully stripped from her soiled, dirty nightgown and slippers, and turned on the sonic. Stepping in, she let the vibrations knock off the dirt and grim from her body. She would have preferred a traditional water shower, but at the moment, anything was better than staying dirty another moment. She liked being clean, and she hadn't been clean for at least four days or so. It hadn't been that long ago since she was on Naboo, yet it seemed like a lifetime ago.

The festivities, the battle, her family, it all seemed like some sort of distant dream. It was difficult to imagine that just the other day she had been celebrated like a hero before being attacked, and then left for dead on a backwaters planet. One moment she was dinning with the Queen of Naboo and various other members of the elite, the next, she was getting ignored and sneered at by junk dealers.

Without realizing it, tears slowly started to run down Padmé's cheeks. Before she knew what was happening, she was sobbing. It had all happened so fast, too fast, and she couldn't hold it in anymore. All of her experiences, the revelations on Tatooine, had at last begun to overwhelm her. One moment she had resolved to never know the man she loved, the next he showed her more about himself than she'd ever thought possible. Without hardly saying anything, Vader had decided to trust her now more than he ever had. He'd taken off his mask and armor, he'd let her take care of him, he trust her with himself as he fell ill. He'd even told her he'd lived here before.

Sliding down the side of the shower wall, Padmé curled up and just sobbed, releasing her anxiety, her grief, her worries, and anything else that she had been forced to bottle up. For the time being, she was safe. She was okay. And once she had her cry, she stood up, and decided to finish, to move on with her life and resolved not to look back or feel sorry anymore.

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That evening, as the suns were just beginning to sink down and darkness was beginning to dominate the Tatooine sky, Shmi Lars was walking back from picking mushrooms off the moister vaporators. It was usually something she did in the mornings when they were fresh, but it had been a busy day with the power converters going out and having to send Owen and Beru into town that she just didn't have time to do it until that evening, when the suns had begun to sink a little lower in the skies. Now, as they were just peaking over the horizon, the farmer's wife paused and looked out over the desert, smiling faintly as just the slightest hint



of a breeze caressed her face. Tatooine was not the most glamorous of places by any stretch of the imagination, but it had its charms all the same.

She always liked going out to pick mushrooms. It was her time to be alone, to reflect on her life. She's had a good life, she decided. Better than most, she was forced to admit. Although she'd been enslaved as a girl, and despite all she'd been through in her earlier life, now, she was happy. More than happy. She had a caring husband and a good step-son which gave her the loving family that she'd always wanted. She had a good home with plenty of friends. It was more than she could have ever hoped or dreamed of having when she'd been a slave. But no matter how good she had it, how often she realized how wonderful her life really was, it was when she was alone, walking back to the house, that Shmi allowed her mind to wonder, allowed herself to think back to the one thing she did not have, the one thing that she wanted more than anything.

Her son.

It had been a little over sixteen years now since Anakin's death, and not a day went by that Shmi did not think of her son and regret the loss of his life. Most days she could carry on, pretend to the outside world that nothing was wrong... but there were days when she just couldn't. Sometimes, at night, she would dream of her baby, reliving that horrible day when the explosion occurred, and wake up sobbing. Cliegg, good man that he was, would always comfort her, but it never truly helped.

She should be thankful, on some level, she knew. It was because of that explosion that she now had the good life she had. While the explosion had killed Anakin, it had injured her. Watto, not knowing what to do with such an injured slave, not wanting to lose a profit by caring for her, sold her to Cliegg. The moisture farmer and a then fifteen-year-old Owen had helped nurse her back to health and gave her a job soon after she was healthy after setting her free. She'd worked there with the Lars' for over a year before she finally allowed herself to move on from her son's death. Not too long after that, she married Cliegg.

But moving on had been hard. Very hard. For the first year, not a day went by the Shmi didn't break down into tears over the loss of her only son at some point during the day. Even now it didn't seem right, it wasn't fair that Anakin had died and she'd lived. He had been so young, had barely begun to live when his life was so cruelly snuffed out of the galaxy. It still didn't make sense what had gone wrong. There had been nothing terribly unusual about the day at all, when suddenly, everything seemed to happen at once.

Over and over again Shmi had played that day over in her mind, wondering what she could have done differently to have stopped the explosion from happening. Maybe she should have argued with Watto more about letting Anakin work on machinery. Her son had loved doing it, but she'd always been apprehensive. It was hard, potentially dangerous work, after all. If only she'd pleaded with her former master more, had begged with him not to let her son work as much as he did, maybe then Anakin would still be alive.

It really was no use dwelling on the 'what ifs' but Shmi couldn't help herself. There were times when she just couldn't believe Anakin was really gone. It just didn't seem possible. A part of her believed that somehow, someday, her son was still alive, was still out there, and Watto had been mistaken about his death. Then, the more rational part of her brain told her

that there was no way a small child could have survived such an explosion. She had barely survived, Anakin, who had been directly in front of it, wouldn't have stood a chance.

Sighing, the older woman shook her head, trying to clear it of any guilty thoughts. She'd told herself on multiple occasion, as had Cliegg, that what had happened wasn't her fault, even though there was always a part of her that would believe it was. It was every mother's nightmare what she'd lived through, and she would never forget it. In her mind, her son's death was solely on her hands.

As she entered her home, she walked into the kitchen and found her husband and step-son sitting at the table. Owen was staring down at the table with a rather guilty expression, looking like the teenager she'd first met, while Cliegg appeared troubled, though not truly angry. When she walked farther in, hoping that there wasn't some sort of dispute going on, the two looked up at her a bit surprised. Shmi smiled at both of them. "Hello," she greeted, before realizing that there was someone missing. "Where's Beru?"

"I'm here," the blonde greeted, stepping in with a tired look about her.

"We've got some visitors," Cliegg stood up from the table, but not before patting Owen on the shoulder.

The older woman frowned, trying to remember if anyone had said anything about inviting neighbors over. She couldn't recall. So as she unpacked her little basket of mushrooms, she waited patiently for someone to explain things to her. Eventually, after a pointed look from his father, Owen offered, "I— Beru and me— we brought home a couple of strangers."

Surprised that her usually cautious step-son would do such a thing, Shmi smiled encouragingly, waiting for more details. "They were in some sort of accident," Beru picked up. "They had no money, and one of them, Arlo, was really badly hurt. We brought them home to help."

The slight surprise wore off Shmi quickly as she smiled over at the two young ones she thought of as her own. The Lars generosity was continuing into the next generation, and she was glad. Cliegg had taken her in when she was all but dying, and now Owen had learned from his father and was helping others, with a little nudge from Beru, she was sure. It did her heart good to see. She always believed that the universe would be a better place if people helped each other out a little more often.

"That was very kind of you both," she made sure to praise, knowing how shy Owen was about stepping out of his comfort zone. "Where are they?"

The two younger Lars appeared uncomfortable, but Cliegg gave her a pleading look. "We put them in the back room," he explained softly.

Shmi's smile faltered ever so slightly, before she forced it back up. "Oh. Good," she nodded quickly. "It's good that it's in use. Have they eaten?"

"No," Beru answered quickly. 'Arlo's... not well,' she turned a little pale. "And Dormé just got out of the shower. I was about to make her something."

Noticing her daughter-in-law's fatigue, Shmi shook her head. "It's all right Beru. I'll make something for... Dormé?" The blonde nodded. "Why don't you sit down. You look like you need a break."

The younger Lars woman smiled gratefully as she took a seat beside her husband. And before her own husband could start questioning her, Shmi quickly excused herself to go prepare a light meal for her guests. Not knowing what 'not well' meant, she made a quick soup and a few sandwiches before putting them on a small tray. She was still a little surprised at suddenly having visitors, but then, she was very proud of Owen and Beru for helping out those who sounded like they really needed it.

Once everything was prepared, and she even poured two glasses of water and one of blue milk, she made her way to the back of the house, where she knew her guests would be staying. As she neared, she heard the soft sound of crying. Pausing outside the cracked door, Shmi peeked in to see the back of a young woman. Long, thick brown hair cascaded down her back, hiding most of her body as she sat in a chair beside the bed. In the actual bed was a very tall young man that she could just make out had lighter color hair.

The young woman within continued to snifle, moving in a manner that told Shmi that she was wiping at her eyes. Poor things, she thought sympathetically. While she didn't want to interrupt, she also knew that it would probably be wise for them to eat, and so, gently, she knocked on the door.

The young woman jumped slightly, before turning around. Despite having a sunburnt face and puffy, red eyes, the girl was gorgeous. Big brown eyes stared back at her in a mix of embarrassment and fear, before settling on comprehension. Standing up, the younger woman rushed to the door and pulled it open the rest of the way.

Smiling warmly, Shmi waited for the other to take in the situation before she spoke. "Hello," she said gently. "I brought you some food," she raised the tray for emphasis.

The other woman smiled before stepping aside. Shmi entered cautiously, unable to stop herself from looking at her other guest. The unconscious man was very young, and looking in very bad shape. Wincing, she realized he was missing an arm, and was sweating quite a bit.

"Thank you," the soft words pulled Shmi from her study.

"You're very welcome," she smiled back, setting the tray down near the bed.

"I'm Dormé," the young woman introduced politely, holding out her hand. Shmi had to wonder at the accent. It sounded so... posh compared to what she was used to, and even though she had just met the other, the farmer could tell this woman was well bred by her bearing.

Taking the girl's hand, Shmi nodded her head, hoping that her own manners would stand up. "I'm Shmi Lars."

The young woman's eyes narrowed for just the slightest minute, a confused look passing over her face, before she nodded back. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Shmi."

## 37. Shmi

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“I’m Shmi Lars.”

Padmé felt her eyes narrow for just the slightest minute, as soon as the name was uttered. That name, she’d heard it before somewhere, she was sure of it. Shmi. Why did it sound so familiar? Like it had importance? But realizing she must seem rude, the senator quickly put on a smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Shmi.”

The older woman gave her just the slightest look of apprehension before smiling back as well. The two stood rather awkwardly for a moment, before Shmi gestured to the food. “Sit,” she encouraged. “Eat. You must be hungry.”

Doing as she was told, Padmé resumed her seat and picked up a sandwich. She must have truly been exhausted, because the moment she looked down at the food, she couldn’t help but remember her and Cory’s lunch dates. She missed the trooper terribly, Firmus and Arlo too. She hoped they were all okay after everything recently. Hopefully none of them had gotten punished for any strange reason since she and Vader had gone missing.

At last taking a bite, the senator could have sighed, it tasted so good. After three days of ration bars, a simple sandwich was heavenly. And truth be told, she was starving. It felt like she hadn’t eaten in days, and with Vader incapacitated, she seriously thought about eating his portion too.

“I’ll let you eat in peace,” Shmi’s gentle voice startled the feasting woman from her thoughts. Gazing up, she found herself staring into the warmest brown eyes she had ever seen. They were so motherly and good that Padmé found herself relaxing instantly, despite knowing nothing about this woman. “If you need anything else, please, don’t hesitate to call or come get me.”

“You don’t have to go,” Padmé found herself saying around the food still in her mouth. There had been no thought of company, but the words had just come out before her brain even knew what was happening. As Shmi gave her a slightly surprised look, the senator found herself smiling sheepishly. “I... I wouldn’t mind some company,” she admitted. And perhaps with this woman here, she could figure out why the name ‘Shmi’ meant something to her.

But the older woman didn’t seem to mind the request, and her smile seemed to become warmer, if possible. Nodding her head, she went out the door and came back a moment later with another chair and sat down near the senator. Neither spoke for several minutes, just sitting as Padmé ate. She noticed how Shmi was looking over Vader, pity in her expression. It still seemed so odd that Darth Vader could inspire something as basic as pity from others after all he’d done. But then, Shmi didn’t know who this was, who Padmé really was, so it was a safe bet that such pity would evaporate once the truth was known.

After another moment, Padmé’s political sensibilities and general goodness wouldn’t allow her to remain silent anymore and she knew she had to speak. “Thank you for the food. It’s delicious,” she complimented. “And for allowing us to stay here. We’re in your debt.”

Like her husband, Shmi waved off the praise, even appearing a little embarrassed by it. "Please, you don't have to thank us. We're always happy to help those in need."

Smiling ruefully, the senator nodded. "Yes, well, you must forgive my praise as I've not seen such hospitality on Tatooine as of yet."

Again, Shmi appeared a little embarrassed as she nodded guiltily. "Yes. I'm afraid the cities here aren't known for their hospitality."

It was probably the understatement of the year, but Padmé didn't press it. She hadn't meant to be so dry, but then, this planet seemed to bring out some of the worst in her. Once more it didn't surprise her that Vader came from such a place. It seemed to accurately reflect the sort of person he was: Barren of emotions, rough personality, blistering temper. If ever there were a person to embody this place, it would be Vader. His hair was even the color of the sands and his skin soaked up the sun surprisingly well. Now that she looked at him, she realized his skin was starting to golden rather than remain the harsh red that hers was.

"I didn't mean to offend," the senator replied quietly, noting the troubled expression on the other woman's face.

But for whatever reason, Shmi only gave her a knowing smile, and waved her off. "I'm not so naïve as to be blind to what this planet really is," she replied easily. "I am only... distressed by how some people act."

Padmé nodded in understanding, before taking up her bowl of soup. It smelled delicious, but she knew she would have to be careful about eating too much. She was starving, but then, she didn't really want to make herself sick over this. It wouldn't be worth it.

Shmi, she noticed while she ate, was looking over Vader again with concern. Almost in a sort of trance, the older woman stood and leaned over the unconscious Sith, staring at him with a frown. For one horrifying moment, Padmé panicked, wondering if this woman recognized him. But then that was impossible. No one knew what was under the mask of Darth Vader, save herself, and the Emperor she was sure. There would be no way that Shmi could guess that this was really the Heir to the Galaxy.

Warm brown eyes narrowed as Shmi leaned in ever closer, hovering over Vader, just staring into his face. It unsettled Padmé slightly, but she could detect no hint of malice or even real suspicion from the other woman. Only curiosity. It made sense too. How often did a farm-wife leave the farm? How often did she get visitors? It was natural to be curious about guest, more so if they were strangers and injured.

But eventually the other woman seemed to realize what she was doing, snapping out of her trance-like study. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "But may I... look over his wounds? I have some experience with treating such things."

The senator nodded quickly. "Of course. Please," she motioned towards the Sith, showing her consent.

While she had basic field-dressing experience and she was sure Beru knew a few things, it made Padmé feel better to have someone who knew more about this than she did look over Vader. While Shmi might not be a medic, the older woman had a wisdom about her, a knowing and understanding that just could not be ignored. If she said she knew how to treat

wounds, Padmé found herself trusting the older woman. It had always behooved the senator to trust her instincts, and at the moment, they were telling her to trust Shmi.

As the farmer's wife pulled back the covers, instantly she hissed, nothing but sympathy in her expression. Those pitying brown eyes scanned over all of the scars and wounds that littered the Sith's body. He still looked so strong, imposing, but Padmé couldn't help wince as she thought about all he must have gone through in order to become what he was. Vader demanded respect, and did not have sympathy for those who were weak. It didn't surprise her now, considering that he had probably gone through more than most beings could imagine and never gave up. Again, his life story was mere speculations and guesses to Padmé, but something told her she was not wrong in her hunches.

Strangely, Shmi didn't seem all too stunned, as Beru had. In fact, as she looked over the scars across his torso, her eyes automatically went to his remaining arm, looking at it carefully, even chancing to pick it up to look at his forearm. Carefully, the older woman traced a long, thin scar that started from the wrist and went almost to his elbow. Vader shuddered, but did not wake.

Shaking her head, Shmi carefully petted the Sith Lord's cheek in a tender, motherly fashion to calm him, before turning her attention to the bacta patches that had been placed over the wounds. With light touches, she checked over all the wounds, still frowning in concern, before gently rolling him over. Surprisingly, unlike when Padmé and Beru had worked on him, Vader rolled over onto his side almost instantly for Shmi, perhaps waking up enough to know that he needed to move.

The farmer's wife nodded to herself, looking at his back. Again, with feather-light touches, she traced a few of the scars that, if Padmé had to guess, were from whipping. The older woman shook her head, the first look of disgust the senator had seen finally marring her features. Shmi even seemed angry, which didn't appear to be a natural expression on her.

When her inspection was complete, and Vader rolled back over onto his back still unconscious, Shmi sat down with a shake of her head. "Poor thing," she said gently. "How long had he been a slave?"

Padmé, certainly not expecting the question, all but choked on the soup she'd been eating. She coughed and hit her chest a few times, Shmi, alarmed by the reaction, was next to her in an instant, patting her on the back as well. When the small episode was finished, and Padmé could breathe again, she turned towards the other woman and gasped out a, "What?"

For her part, Shmi seemed upset as she frowned at the senator. "I'm so sorry," she apologized quickly. "That was thoughtless of me. I didn't mean to be so blunt."

But Padmé was still stuck on the other woman's question. "How... how did you know he's a slave?" she asked, her mind trying to come up with a logical reason, but failing. Again, she had to wonder if this woman knew more about Vader than she'd thought.

Smiling sadly, Shmi pointed to Vader's arm. "His scar. Just there." It was the one she'd touched so gently.

The senator frowned. "I don't understand," she admitted. The world of slavery and brusque manners was still so strange and new to her. Working in politics and living on Coruscant had trained the former queen to think directly, but to speak around issues. No one

ever said what they really meant, no one showed what they really felt. Perhaps that's why Darth Vader had been so intimidating to her and other politicians. He never talked around issues, always said exactly what he meant, and if he was displeased, he showed it. Tatooine, too, was a place where people did not seem to understand the importance of tact or bothered with softening their words.

A poignant sort of smile appeared on Shmi's face as she pulled up her sleeve and revealed a similar scar on her own arm. Padmé stared at it with wide eyes, before looking into the face of her hostess. "Every slave as a transmitter placed somewhere in their body," she explained calmly, even as the younger woman began feeling ill. 'It's most commonly placed in the arm, here,' she pointed to her scar, "but that's not always the case. These transmitters allow owners to track their slaves should the slaves run away, and gives them the option of detonating a small explosive."

"You mean these transmitters can kill slaves?" Padmé reeled back in disgust.

Shmi probably thought Padmé was some sort of simpleton due to her gross ignorance about how slavery actually worked, but thankfully the older woman didn't say anything about it. Instead, she just nodded her head and went on answering the questions. "Yes. If the slave is not worth retrieving. Most masters don't want to lose money and will hire others to bring the slave back."

"But you..." Padmé trailed off. A direct question was usually considered rude, and it went against her upbringing, but then, she was on Tatooine.

Thankfully, Shmi seemed to know what she wanted to ask, and the farmer only smiled. "Yes," she nodded. "I was once a slave, too. The only way to truly be ride of the tracking device is to have it surgically removed."

"Oh," was all the senator could muster up to say. So, Vader had been a slave. A real slave. As in, Palpatin must have at one point bought Vader.

It didn't seem likely that Palpatine would place any sort of transmitter into his apprentice, however, as the Emperor seemed to know everything all ready. And Vader was utterly loyal to the older man. The younger man would not run. And if someone were to get ahold of the controls that showed Vader's location... it was potentially too much of a risk to leave a transmitter in the younger Sith. And besides, it appeared that her companion no longer had one anyway, which meant that it had either been placed in him by someone else and Palpatine had had it removed, or Palpatine had placed it in and Vader had been smart enough to remove it himself. Before she would have wondered if she'd ever know for sure, but lately, she'd decided that if she stayed patient, she'd know in time.

But knowing that such confessions were usually difficult, Padmé found herself reaching out to the other woman, taking her hand, and looking her in the eye. "I didn't mean to stir up anything," she murmured.

The older woman smiled warmly at her, and squeezed her hand back. "You did nothing wrong," she reassured. 'I wanted to tell.' Padmé nodded, but must have had an intense look of curiosity, because Shmi continued on with a knowing twinkle in her eye. "I'm lucky to have had Cliegg buy me and set me free."

The statement was said with such fondness that the senator wasn't quite sure what to make of the statement. A part of her was disgusted, to know that anyone would buy another person; Cliegg hadn't seemed like the type. But then, this story had a happy ending. The owner had actually married his slave. It sounded like a fairytale dream. Yet a part of Padmé rebelled against the thought of ever owning another being. But maybe he'd only done it to help? Again, she wondered at what sort of planet she'd entered into.

Shmi, however, was looking back down at Vader, her expression kind and concerned. Again, Padmé wondered if everyone would look at him that way if they knew who he was. For whatever reason, the senator believed Shmi still would.

"His master must have been very cruel."

An overwhelming wave of emotion suddenly hit Padmé as she stared down at the scars. All those times Vader had been worried about the Emperor and she'd disregarded him. No wonder he'd been panicked when she'd been summoned to speak with the Emperor while he'd been gone. No wonder he had been worried when their 'relationship' had been broadcast on the news. All those times she caused him problems... What if Palpatine had taken it out of his apprentice? What if some of those newer looking marks were because of her?

Tears spilled from her eyes before she even knew what was happening. Each time she thought she was adjusting, something came up to remind her of just how screwed up everything was. When had her life gotten this complicated? Why had she gotten so involved with this man? He'd brought her nothing but misery since she'd formally met him—he'd brought her misery when she didn't even know him, too. But now she knew him so intimately. It was difficult to harden herself against him when she simply knew so much. It had hard to ignore him now when she knew more about him than anyone else, even before she'd seen behind the mask. Darth Vader was highly emotional if one was patient enough to see, to push past the overwhelm anger to look. And for whatever reason, Padmé could see, had seen, and connected herself almost unconsciously to him. She was so connected she knew for certain that she could feel what he felt, and seeing him like this, learning so much about him in such a short time after months of knowing nothing...

The sudden sensation of arms wrapping around her startled Padmé so completely, she jumped back. She was met with the kind, warm eyes of Shmi as the older woman held out her arms, inviting the other for an embrace. She didn't know this woman, didn't know where she had been born, what she liked and didn't like, or even how old she was. But those eyes, full of understanding and compassion undid the senator, and she found herself falling into the arms of one of the few people here that actually seemed to care.

Instantly, Shmi's arms were around her as Padmé sobbed. She hated herself for falling apart like this in front of someone, yet she felt so starved for the simplest touch. It felt so good to just be held, to feel the warmth and heart beat of another person, especially after three hellish days of watching others scorn you. Vader had offered what comfort he'd been able to muster that first day, but compared to what others could do, it was rather pathetic. But since it had been from Vader, it had been a rather meaningful gesture, but not what Padmé had needed. She wanted so much more from him, needed more. She needed comfort, real comfort from someone that could really show empathy.



As Shmi rubbed circles on her back, cooing and murmuring, Padmé felt like a child, but didn't care. She felt rather wretched right now. Her brain was having such a terrible time processing everything since coming to Tatooine and despite promising herself in the shower to move on, it was proving to be harder than she thought. The stress hadn't gone away the first cry out. It had unknotted itself slightly, but it was still working its way out of her system. And as she was being held, feeling her back being rubbed, the proud Galactic Senator felt her stiff shoulders sag as she decided to give up control at long last. She was tired. Tired of being the responsible one. Tired of having to worry about everyone and everything else. Sitting here in Shmi Lar's arms, Padmé decided it wasn't such a very bad thing to be taken care of.

"You poor, poor thing," Shmi murmured, rocking back and forth.

"I just... c-can't d-do it an-anymore," the younger woman sobbed. "I j-just can't!"

"Shh, you don't have to. You don't have to."

"But I c-can't l-leave h-him," Padmé cried harder, unsure what she really meant by the statement.

"I'll stay with him," she heard Shmi respond. "You can rest now. I'll look after him. Shh. It's all going to be all right."

Shaking, the younger woman just cried. A part of her knew she was being dramatic and childish, but the other part couldn't have cared less. Right now she would indulge in the sympathy and concern being shown to her. She wasn't normally the type, but, again, at the moment she didn't care.

Eventually, when she calmed, she pulled away from Shmi, muttering apologies. Shmi didn't seem to mind, though, and only offered more reassurance. And without meaning to, Padmé found herself opening up to the other woman. There was just something about her that Padmé knew she could trust. She told Shmi about their crash, about the hellish walk into the city, about the nightmare of trying to get help, about how scared she'd been when no one would offer assistance, and her fear that Vader would die because he wouldn't get help in time. She even told her about how disgusted she was with the slave trade here, and about how someone had offered to buy Vader from her.

The farm wife listened intently, patiently, as Padmé rambled on and on. It actually stunned the younger woman slightly. She normally didn't talk on like this, but once she'd started, she couldn't stop. Shmi felt safe, and she felt as though she could trust the farmer completely. Again, the name stirred something in Padmé and as she spoke, she tried to remember where she'd heard it before, why it was important, but couldn't. But she trusted her instincts and decided to chance the risk of opening herself up.

Thankfully, Shmi didn't ask questions, just accepted what was being told to her, which relieved the senator. It wasn't ignorant agreement, however, as she could tell the other woman did have questions, but respectfully declined from asking them. And soon, an hour had gone by with Padmé just talking and Shmi calmly explaining things about Tatooine.

When finally they noticed it was dark, Shmi stood, patting Padmé's arm affectionately. "Perhaps you should take some rest now, dear," she smiled. "I'll make you up a bed in here if you'd like."

“That’d be wonderful, actually,” the younger woman replied, suddenly realizing how tired she was.

“I’ll be right back.”

As Padmé closed her eyes, it seemed like only a moment before Shmi came back and gently shook the dozing girl. “Come lie down here.”

Startled slightly, the senator looked over to the corner of the room, and noticed that a little bed had been made up for her. It was low to the ground, nothing but a mattress, but it looked like the finest bed in the world to her. There were soft looking pillows and cushy blankets. And so, allowing Shmi to help her, she made it to the little bed and sighed in relief when she felt her head hit the pillows. “But... he needs,” she murmured, remembering Vader, but Shmi pushed her back down.

“Shh. I’ll watch over him. Get some rest now.”

Padmé didn’t argue, and it didn’t take more than a moment before she slipped into an exhausted, but pleasant sleep.

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As Shmi covered up the weary Dormé, she couldn’t help the small, sad smile that came to her lips. Such a sweet girl, but oh the horrors she’d endured the past several days. No one should have had to suffer like that. The poor thing was exhausted.

Once the girl was settled, the farmer’s wife turned and looked at the young man who was still unconscious on the bed. Walking over to him, she placed her hand on his forehead again. He shuddered in his sleep, but didn’t wake. It was a little concerning that he hadn’t woken, but then Shmi knew that these things took time. Grabbing a glass of water from off the tray, she carefully lifted the young man’s head and poured a little water down his throat. Thankfully, he drank it without complaint, greedily consuming it until Shmi pulled the cup away.

Arlo, she believed the boy’s name was, gave a snort that sounded strangely disapproving, before settling back down. He was burning up, and with her motherly instincts coming to life, Shmi grabbed a cloth and dipped it in the cool water left by the bed. As she dabbed his brow, face, and neck, she fell into a sort of quiet meditation.

Studying the stern looking face now that she was at liberty to do so, without anyone noticing, Shmi took in the face before her. It was a handsome face, but bespoke of far too many concerns and misery. He looked so young, and yet so old at the same time. His permanent expression seemed to be a strange combination of severe disapproval and complete blank. Again, her eyes fell upon the scar on his remaining arm. She understood what it was like to have bad masters, ones that treated your life as though it were insignificant. But even after all her years in slavery, she’d never seen someone so... beaten. Usually masters, without perhaps consciously realizing it, liked to keep their slaves looking good. If they were beaten up too badly, they would not fetch as good of a price on the market should they decide to sell later on. And there was also the fact that slaves were not cheap, and to ruin something you paid so much money for was a waste. Shmi herself bore a few scars

from past masters losing their tempers, but it was nothing compared to what this young man had apparently endured.

Again, a wave of pity washed over Shmi as she gazed down at the young face. Even his face bore scars. She wondered if the boy had lost his arm because of a past master. Staring at it, she saw that it had been attached—quite painfully so—to mechanical pieces. At first glance it looked like some sort of metal cap to place over the wound that had been inserted into the remaining skin around the injury. But now that she looked at it, she realized that the metal had been cleanly sliced. He would have had to have had a mechanical arm, but it had been cut off. Those were quite expensive, no one around here could afford to give themselves mechanical limbs, let alone give one to a slave.

But then, he wasn't a slave anymore, was he? The scar on his arm was fair proof to suggest he wasn't. So was Dormé's reaction and story, for that matter. The girl had been appalled that someone had offered to buy Arlo from her while in town, and her reaction to even speaking about slavery meant that she wasn't used to it, and Shmi could certainly tell she didn't agree with it. To meet someone so sensitive to slavery was rare for the inhabitance of Tatooine, and it only served to make Shmi all the more curious about her guests.

It wasn't all that surprising, however, that Arlo did not speak of his time as a slave. She could only imagine what horrors he'd had to live through. Bringing them up would have to be extremely painful. She knew she wouldn't bring up such a horrible past easily had she gone through what he looked like he'd been through.

Whatever had happened in this boy's life before, Shmi was grateful that it was over now. That scar on his arm meant that he was freed. And he had such a good companion in Dormé. Even though she had only just met the girl, the farmer knew that the younger woman cared deeply about this young man. So deeply, in fact, that Shmi wondered if there was anything going on between the two. While she would have never considered herself as much of a romantic, she couldn't help but believe they'd make a handsome couple together. Dormé was very beautiful and Arlo handsome.

Chiseled, defined features, blonde hair, and a dimple in his chin assured that this young man would always have admirers despite the scars and stern appearance. But the more she looked at him, the more Shmi felt her heart break. Without meaning to, her mind wandered back to the image of a little boy that she'd desperately clung to for sixteen years now. Despite all that time, Shmi made sure to keep a picture of her son in her mind. And while many of his features had faded unconsciously from her mind, his face had not.

Anakin had had blonde hair and a dimple in his chin too. A round face had housed wide, curious blue eyes, the brightest blue eyes she had ever seen. His hair had been pale golden, the likes of which were not all that common on Tatooine. He had the most beautiful smile, too. Every time Shmi thought about it, her heart broke knowing that that smile was gone forever, snuffed out before anyone could come to cherish that small gift as much as she had.

Tears sprang up into her eyes, but Shmi had long ago stopped crying much. It had been nearly two decades, she should have been over her son's death, but she wasn't. She knew she never truly would be. No parent should have had to grieve the loss of their child, but Shmi had, she'd grieved and endured as best as she could. Now all she had were her memories of the little miracle baby that had made her world so complete.

As she came out of her memories, Shmi couldn't help but wonder what her son would look like had he lived. Her eyes scanned over Arlo again, and something odd stirred in her breast. While this young man was handsome, she hoped that her Anakin would not look like him. This young man's striking looks were marred so horribly by years of abuse and anger. Her little boy had always been so happy, so cheerful, always looking for ways to make other people happy. As a mother, she hoped that her son would never have had reason to grow as severe and miserable looking as this young man. It was understandable why this boy looked the way he did, but it still saddened Shmi.

No, she hoped that wherever Anakin's soul was, it was at peace and one with the Force. She dearly hoped that he knew how much she missed him and how much she loved him. She knew he wouldn't want her to worry or feel guilty, but she couldn't always help those feelings. They were natural, after all, for all those who survived when others didn't.

A slight sound from behind her alerted Shmi that she was no longer alone. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Beru entering, creeping as carefully as she could. The blonde stared at her mother-in-law before offering a small smile.

"We were beginning to wonder what happened to you," the younger woman teased.

Shmi smiled. Beru was a good woman. Very good. Owen was a lucky man. Beru was exactly what the overly cautious, stern young man needed in his life.

"Dormé is sleeping," she pointed over to the corner where the brunette was curled up, fast asleep. "I promised to watch over him."

Beru nodded her understanding, before frowning. "Do you think he'll be okay? I mean..."

Her daughter-in-law had seen the wounds and should have known that while infected, the young man would more than likely make a full recovery. He was strong, despite his weakened condition, and strong young men had a way of bouncing back. But then, Beru was not used to seeing someone so abused.

"I'm sure he'll recover," Shmi replied softly. "He just needs rest."

The younger woman nodded before simply falling silent and stood beside her mother-in-law. After a few moments had passed, Beru sighed. "If you need a break, come find me. I'll sit with him too."

Shmi smiled warmly at the kind-hearted woman. "All right. Goodnight. Get some rest."

The blonde nodded, squeezing Shmi's shoulder in comfort, before heading out of the room, leaving her mother-in-law to think and dwell upon the past and present.

## 38. Toasts of Blood

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When Firmus had signed up to join the Imperial Navy, he had never once believed that one day he would be a Lieutenant-Commander, hand chosen by Lord Vader himself, with an older officer, a Storm Trooper, and one of the most influential Galactic Senator for friends. But it had happened. So now that he was sitting in Lord Vader's personal wing in a conference room drinking himself stupid with Arlo and Cory, while still grieving the loss of Senator Amidala, as well as his leader, Lord Vader, the young officer didn't think too much of it. He never would have thought that his life would take this bizarre turn, but he was willing to ride out the wave, becoming strangely used to the curves life decided to throw his way recently.

As he turned to look at his companions, there was a slight delay in his sight as his eyes tried to readjust from moving them from staring down at the brandy he cradled in his hand, to the other two men who appeared to be in a similar state. Firmus decided he felt pretty good. And warm. He felt good. It was about time too, since the last few days had been a virtual hell.

After the funeral, the Emperor had not wasted a moment in looking for a new candidate to fill in Vader's position as Supreme Commander of the Imperial Navy. The past few days Grand Moffs, generals, and admirals had all been kissing ass and strutting around, trying to impress the Emperor in hopes of gaining the position. Needless to say, the lesser officers and crew members were mistreated and abused in the battle to gain more power. Of course, that was nothing to the Grand Moffs all but killing one another in hopes of becoming the Emperor's new heir.

Because of his devotion to the security and upkeep of the Empire, it was sometimes forgotten that Vader was next in line to the throne. The Sith Lord always seemed much more interested in the militaristic than the political power he wielded. He'd been a doer, not someone that beat around the bush. Because of this, he'd earned the admiration and devotion of a lot of people, despite having also garnered their fear. But when in the military, seeing the devotion the Sith had held for his troops, it was hard not to respect that man, despite his need for brutal efficiency.

They had been robbed of the best of the best and were now stuck with mediocre... at best. Stepping in to fill the shoes of Lord Vader was one Admiral DuMont, now Supreme Commander DuMont. His military records were impressive... if for only the fact that he tended to take credit for other people's work and accomplishments. Thus far Piett had seen the new Supreme Commander to be nothing short of a pompous ass that strut about the military base with his chest puffed out too far and his noise up in the air. Many hoped he'd get a nose bleed.

But that wasn't the worst of it. Because he obviously harbored an inferiority complex, DuMont had also set about the enormous undertaking of revamping Lord Vader's system. Security checks were changed, records were gone through, and —because Firmus suspected the Emperor and Vader had not gotten along quite as well as they'd wanted everyone to believe—a small group had been ordered to go through Lord Vader's personal wing to 'clean it out.' The young man believed it had more to do with looking for secrets and proof of

betrayal that DuMont could use to further gain the Emperor's favor, and give the admiral the excuse to run Vader's name in the mud.

What an idiot, Piett snorted to himself. It was a pretty good plan... except he'd decided to keep Lord Vader's personal assistant and assigned him the task of arranging a 'cleaning committee.' And what a committee they were!

Looking over at Arlo, Firmus found himself giggling. The Lieutenant, after so long of being Vader's assistant, was quite cunning and good at keeping a straight face. It had not been hard for the older officer to convince DuMont of allowing him to undertake the job himself, needing only another officer and a trooper for the heavy lifting. Seeing as Piett had recently been promoted and was 'not yet acclimated' into the Vader system, and young enough to still have a 'burning ambition' as DuMont put it. The new Commander had allowed the younger officer to help, seeing as Firmus was also his personal assistant when out in the field and they were both currently planet-side. DuMont hadn't even bothered to look over Cory's records. If he had, he might have been suspicious of having three very pro-Vader men looking through the Sith's stuff.

As it was, there was very little for them to actually do. Other than taking inventory, they could not access the Sith's personal computers. They were locked up tighter than the jaws of a rancor on its prey. Not even Arlo, who had the most security clearance for the area and computer skills, could access anything. The codes used were ones they'd never seen before and couldn't begin to fathom. The protocol droid they'd found meandering about knew nothing, and the astromech would not cooperate. And since they couldn't access the computers to delete any evidence they might have found in regards to Black Hand—not that they thought Vader would be stupid enough to record anything—and there wasn't much in his room at all, only a creepy looking pod-like device, they'd recorded what they could and quit early.

Cory had mentioned that perhaps they ought to go through Senator Amidala's things as well, but Arlo decided against it. "DuMont said Lord Vader's things, not the senator's," he'd argued. They ultimately decided to call the family and see if they wanted to retrieve the items... once they were given clearance to contact the Naberries, that is.

And so, with their work complete, they 'liberated' a bottle or two of Corellian Brandy from Senator Amidala's room, believing she wouldn't miss it and would actually want them to have it, they sat down in a conference room and decided to run out the clock until their shifts were over. Normally, even the suggestion of doing such a thing went against Firmus's morals, especially when working, but with the week he'd had, there was nothing he'd wanted more than to drink himself silly. Cory, too, must have been in the same boat, seeing as it was almost against a trooper's programming to do anything like this while on duty. Apparently Arlo didn't mind so much, or at least not with DuMont over him. After serving Lord Vader, anyone else looked like a pussycat in comparison.

In fact, most of the employees at the Imperial Military Base must have thought along the same lines as Pilor. While the new Supreme Commander was trying to instill respect into the people he now took control over, it wasn't working so well. Most of the officers assigned here held nothing but resentment for their new leader. While it was a stretch to even hint that they'd liked Vader, they had respected the Sith, and had come to believe that the way he had done things was the best way. They had morphed into some of the most elite and efficient

officers in the army and navy. Now having to change everything... well, they didn't like that too much. They resented DuMont's belief that they weren't capable of meeting his standards and doubting their efficiency after being under the strictest taskmaster in the galaxy.

Needless to say, respect for the new S.C. was severely lacking. Already, even after just several days, Piett had witnessed a few disrespectful comments from other generals and admirals, and more than a few rolled eyes from lesser officers. No one would have dared to think of doing such a thing if it had been Lord Vader giving the orders. Supreme Commander DuMont just didn't have the same ring—or dread—behind it as Supreme Commander Darth Vader. The fact that DuMont also lacked a lightsaber and terrifying Force powers might have also had something to do with it.

And so, having been completely desensitized to anyone or anything but Lord Vader, Piett and his friends felt rather safe as they went through a bottle—or two, he couldn't really remember too clearly which they were on— of Corellian Brandy. Their work had been completed, after all, and none of them really had anything else to do. Arlo would just have to do more filing and sorting, Cory standing watch over some door or other, and Piett would have to just look over reports to either pass off to DuMont or another bigwig. Drinking was much more fun.

"You know," Arlo spoke up, leaning back very casually in his chair. "I still can't believe they're gone."

"Galaxy's gone t' shit," Piett agreed, taking a swallow of his brandy. It had long ago stopped burning.

In between the two officers, Cory started chuckling. It was a dark, foreboding sound. "Think this's hell?" he questioned, eyeing them with an eerie smile. "Neither of you fought in the Clone Wars, did ya?"

Piett instantly shook his head in the negative, while Arlo frowned. "At tha' time I was still on my home planet, or jus' gettin' int' the navy."

The trooper nodded, staring down blankly at his glass, swirling around the contents. "I didn't get a whole lotta fighting time, but I seen a thing or two," he began quietly. "Things look bad now, but it ain't nothin' compared to full out war an' rebellion."

Struggling to make his brain work, Firmus leaned forward, towards the clone. "You were at Corellia, right?"

The trooper's lip twitched slightly into a sad sort of smile, before it fell off his face just as quickly. Firmus wondered at it. "Yeah."

"That's where somma the worst rebellion was," Arlo pointed out.

Again, the clone nodded. "Yeah. They're real fighters 'em Corellians. It was... well, I liked the action, but it was a helluva lot worse than this. The Empire's still intact, and as long as it is, there'll be control and order."

"An' how long ya think it'll last?"

Piett was surprised by the scorn in Pilor's tone. "Whadda mean?" he found himself asking.

The older officer's expression was stern. "Think of it. With Vader gone, what'll keep people in line? Ya think DuMont can keep everyone in line? Ya think planets are jus' gunna let the murder of Vader and Amidala go? The entire Empire's still in a' uproar. 'S only a matter a' time before something explodes."

"An' when it does, it ain't gunna be pretty," Cory swallowed the rest of his drink before pouring himself more. "It'll be jus' like Corellia all over again."

They all fell silent, each in their own thoughts. Firmus, for his part, wondered what war was really like. His home planet had been supportive of the Empire since the beginning, and while it was a rather rough planet, he'd never seen true rebellion. Corruption and gang violence, yes, but that wasn't to the same scale as what Arlo and Cory seemed to be worried about. In his inebriated state, he'd forgotten about the possibilities of uprisings.

"It ain't the fighting I'mma not lookin' forward to." The two officers were startled out of their meditation by the trooper's strange confession. "I don't mind seein' soldiers get shot or nothin'. I'm used to that. It's th'...it's the civilians I don't wanna see."

Arlo was nodding a little exaggeratedly, but his face was completely serious. "They often get in th' way," he agreed.

"It ain't jus' that," the trooper was now staring very hard at the table top. Firmus was surprised he didn't burn a hole through it with his intensity. "It's... when I was patrolling once, back on Corellia, I came across a little kid in a' ally. He didn't look very old. He was only 'bout this tall," he showed them with his hands. "He didn't even seem like he was all that coordinated yet, like he should still be drinkin' from a' bottle..." he fell silent, his hard features melting into something soft and sad. "He was jus' standin' in a puddle a' filth. He wasn't wearin' any shoes."

"I asked him what he was doin', but he didn't answer, just stood lookin' up at me with them big eyes, shivering. I asked him where his parents were, but he said he didn't know. I took 'im to headquarters and dropped him off with some other fellas who'd take him to a' orphanage or something." Again, the trooper paused, seeming to be completely lost in memory, something Piett had never seen or imaged a trooper would allow himself to do.

"When I handed 'im over he... cried. I don't know why it affected me," Cory scowled. "I'd seen squealin' brats before... But this was different. He cried an' tried to latch on t' me. He begged for me not t' go, even though I told him there were other troopers for him to look at. But that didn't seem to help. He jus' cried and cried, until I walked away."

"I only managed to turn the corner and was getting ready to leave, when he rushed after me." A bitter sort of smile formed on the clone's face. "I don't know how he recognized me, seein' as there were 'bout ten other troopers there, but he ran right up to me and begged t' go with me and not leave him alone... Another trooper came and took 'im back away while he screamed for me... Tha' was the worst thing I ever did, leavin' that kid there, not lookin' back," the clone whispered. "He needed someone, needed me, and I just left him."

Once more, the three men fell silent. Perhaps it was because of the alcohol, but Firmus found he had tears in his eyes. While he'd always sort of liked Cory, the trooper had always just been another clone. It was true that clones attitudes varied from individual to individual, but they were very slight and each trooper was relatively exactly the same as another. Not



once in his limited experience had Piett seen a trooper act so completely out of character. He'd been shocked at Cory's humor when they'd first met, intrigued by his like and apparent friendship with Senator Amidala, and had been floored when he'd agreed to drink with them.

But not even the disobedience of drinking while on the job could compare to the sad confession that they'd all just heard. Suddenly Cory became much more real, more... human to Piett. This wasn't just a clone, this was a human being, with feelings and emotions. He wasn't some sort of droid, he was really real. He had memories and feelings that made him sad just like the rest of them. CT-585 was unique, different from other clones, even CT-584 or CT-586. He was Cory, a man fiercely loyal to the Empire, to those he considered friend, and was saddened by the fact that he'd had to leave behind a little boy. It sickened Firmus to admit, even to just himself, that he'd once harbored the belief that he was superior to this man because he was a clone, even if the belief had been largely unconscious.

"That's what rebellion really is, kid."

Startled from his thoughts, Firmus looked up into the hard, dark eyes of the clone trooper, who was staring at him with a surprising amount of sobriety. It unnerved the young officer slightly. It almost made him believe the trooper had known what he'd been thinking.

"It's 'bout people sufferin'," Cory went on. 'I don't much feel sorry for soldiers,' he repeated. "They know what they're gettin' into. They can understand war and the like. But not kids. Rebellion creates more harm than good. That's somethin' those Rebel bastards don't understand. They think they're fightin' is for the good of the galaxy? They're dead wrong. Lord Vader had it right. He knew how to take care of everythin' that's wrong with the Empire quietly, without stirrin' up trouble for those who don't understand fightin'."

Arlo gave Piett a look that told the younger man to stay quiet. What they could understand and a trooper could not, was that Vader was far from the angelic savior of humanity, as many clones seemed to believe without a shred of doubt. Yet, they both also knew that Lord Vader, despite his cruelty, had these strange moments of... empathy. Not that he acted any different or said anything different, but he also seemed to have an understanding about humanity that the Emperor lacked. While still cruel and demanding, Vader had a sense of fairness that could not be denied. The Sith Lord had been harsh and malicious, but there was a code. To stay alive under Lord Vader's command, all that anyone was required to do was their job to the best of their abilities and be truthful. There was no bribery and flattery with Vader as there was with the Emperor. Actions spoke much louder than words for the Supreme Commander. Only high ranking officers suffered from his temper because they were supposed to be in control as well as those who proved to be woefully inadequate after they boasted of their talents.

If truthful with Lord Vader, he was prone to treat you well. Firmus witnessed a corporal once as he confess that he couldn't do a job the Sith had asked of him. Vader had snapped, yelled, but in the end, had not even touched the young man because, Piett had come to realize, the corporal had been honest and had stopped before he could disappoint. Because of that, Vader had rewarded the other soldier with only a berating and allowed him to keep his life. Piett, too, had been bold enough when interviewed by Vader, to confess his doubt in handling the promotion and task he'd been asked to fulfill, and the Sith Lord had been surprisingly reasonable.

It had been tricky to balance Lord Vader's moods, but if you could, you were guaranteed success, as well as your life. And while there was much left to be desired of the Sith, Piett couldn't help but feel that Vader would be better for the Empire than even the Emperor. The Emperor was rarely seen, staying in his comfortable palace and surround himself with politicians and flatterers. Did Emperor Palpatine really understand the people he ruled? Did he really understand what was happening in the galaxy the way Vader did? Vader was so practical and realistic, the Emperor was just very good with his words. That's why Piett had agreed to all of Vader's plans. The Sith hadn't even had to bribe him. He'd just state the truth, and Firmus knew it.

Once more, the young officer felt a swell of hatred fill his chest as he thought about the Rebels. They had killed the only hope for true and lasting peace, Firmus just knew it. Somehow he knew Vader and Senator Amidala had been working together on something. With Vader's leadership and power and Senator Amidala's popularity and compassion, the galaxy had been posed to truly begin an era of peace. But of course the Rebels had to stir up more trouble and ruined everything. They couldn't just fall into the new system peacefully, like everyone else, and created far more harm than good in their quest to bring 'order.' They were just power-hungry fools that fell onto the wrong side of the Emperor's grace, Piett was convinced.

"Well then," Arlo announced after a moment, pouring them each more brandy, even Firmus, despite having had a little left. "Here's a toast to our fallen comrades, and to the hope of future peace."

The three men raised their glasses in the air, clinking them together, before gulping down the liquid in one swallow. It was really amazing how much Firmus didn't feel anymore, but he was glad of it. It was easier to feel nothing than to let anxiety over all that had happened get the better of him.

"'shouldda made a toast t' th' fall of the Rebellion," he slurred.

While out of alcohol, all three men raised their glasses as best as they could in their intoxicated state. "Hear, hear!" Arlo cried.

"An' th' hope that their blood'll pave th' streets," Cory added darkly.

And so, the three men each sat back, nodding off, their memories starting to fade. So it came as no surprise that Firmus would be unable to recall the door to the conference room carefully sliding closed after being opened a crack and a curious, red sensor that had been scanning them over pulled back as the little blue and white droid rolled away.

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It was not usually something Sidious allowed himself to be seen doing, but as he sat atop the portable throne, looking down at the bloodied, shivering figure, he couldn't deny his pleasure at seeing this. While he adored witnessing death, it was usually bad for the public image. Today, it would help it.

Because of the recent tragedy that befell the Empire, the Emperor had decided to have a public execution. It was to alleviate some fears, make promises, and of course, send a message to Rebel High Command. It had taken longer than he would have liked to arrange

everything and plan for his revenge against the Rebels, but he was confident that they would soon be eradicated. Vader's death was an inconvenience seeing as he was the one who had planned the military operations for the past several years, but it was of no matter. Sidious had planned wars before, he could do so again.

The rebel before him was pleading pathetically, but neither the Emperor nor the crowd had much pity. They wanted blood almost as much as he did, which only made the Sith smile all the more. This rebel was pale, severely malnourished, and bruised. There was also little left of his mind after Vader had interrogated him. His former apprentice had been most displeased that he could not kill the man after his attack on Senator Amidala, but Sidious had known that keeping this man alive would be useful. He'd had to make Vader be satisfied with having dismembered the rebel.

Raising a hand to calm the crowd, Sidious addressed the petrified prisoner. "You are here today to be executed after being found guilty of your attack upon Senator Amidala several months ago," he said simply. The crowd hissed, growled in fury. Calls for his immediate death the most voiced. The hatred served to amuse and invigorate the Sith Lord. "Rise and accept your punishment."

"P-p-please," the man begged, wetting himself.

"You know the law," Sidious sneered. "Treason is a crime punishable by death. You knew that when you entered into your Rebel Alliance."

The Storm Troopers surrounding the man grabbed him under the arms, and dragged him out into the designated shooting range. Once there, they dropped him unceremoniously, before taking their places in the firing squad. Beside him, Grand Moff Tarkin stood with sneer on his face while Supreme Commander DuMont stood at ground level with his troopers, ready to give the order to fire. The Emperor could sense anticipation from both men, as well as the extreme hatred they harbored for one another. They were both honored to stand where Vader had once stood, but they were consumed with jealousy of the other. While DuMont got the coveted military title, Tarkin was still more favored by the Emperor, and Sidious delighted in setting them up to oppose one another. After all, the more desirable title of heir was still open.

With only a nod from the Emperor, DuMont commanded his troopers. "Troopers at the ready!"

Moff Tarkin smiled in cold delight. "Let this be a day that the Rebels mark. They will rue the day they thought to oppose the Empire."

"Aim!"

The crowd went wild, screaming and flinging bottles and food and whatever else they had brought with them at the prisoner. The rebel, however, sat on his knees, shaking violently, trying his best to dodge the debris being thrown at him. Troopers standing guard around the crowd were forced to hold many of them back. They all wanted this man dead. This was good. To stir up the people meant Sidious could more easily manipulate them to further his own desires.

"Fire!"

The blasters sounded in the air, barely audible over the roar of the crowd. Every trooper hit true, and within seconds, the rebel was dead. It was a fairly clean death, and by the disappointment and growing hisses of the crowd, Sidious knew the people thought so too. This was good, of course. They wanted more blood, and he was going to give it to them.

“My people,” the Emperor stood, hands raised in a plea for silence. “My people. Today was a day that I never wanted to come,” he began with mock-frailty. “But I assure you, those responsible for the death of Lord Vader and Senator Amidala will be found and brought to justice!”

A deafening cheer went up. Deciding to leave them wanting more, Sidious left, making his way back into the palace, taking the underground tunnel system, flanked by his royal guards as well as a small contingent of Storm Troopers. Since the attack over Naboo, security everywhere had gone up. It was expected, though Sidious hardly needed it. His greatest threat was now gone. There was no chance of Vader killing him now. But for appearance sake, as well as to give the image of the frail old man, he allowed himself to be ushered about like some sort of weak, pathetic creature. It had worked to his advantage before, it would work again.

When they finally made it back to the Throne Room, Sidious went atop his throne and sat. “Leave me,” he commanded. “Clear the halls.”

The chief of his guard predictably stepped forward. “Your highness,” he replied with a bow and the utmost humility in his voice. “It would not be—”

“Do as I say,” the Emperor snapped. He was in no mood to be questioned. Right now he had business to conduct, and he would do it without interruptions.

Knowing his place, the chief bowed low, backing away. “Yes, your highness.”

And after a moment, everyone had left. When he could no longer sense anyone in the halls, he pressed a button on the throne, signaling for his awaiting servant to enter. It did not take long for the Emperor to know his call had been heeded. The distinct shink shink shink sound of his approach could be heard throughout the hall. Moments later, the doors opened to reveal a shadowy figure.

Sidious sat scowling as the figure came to stop before the throne, kneeling humbly. “What is thy bidding, your highness?” the deep, gravelly voice floated up to him from below.

“I have a job for you,” the Sith Master wasted no time.

“Yes, my lord.”

“I have kept you alive for such a purpose as this. I can kill you just as easily, but have chosen to let you live, to continue to serve me.” It was good to remind lesser beings of their place in his Empire.

“Yes, my lord. I will do whatever you command.”

Smirking slightly at the delicious taste of fear and obedience, the Emperor regarded the kneeling figure. He had always wondered how he would use this creature’s specific talents again, but when he had peered into the Force, he’d known there would be a time when he

would require such services again. He was pleased the Force had shown him of this need. It would prove to be most useful.

"I want you to hunt down the Rebel leaders and destroy them," he ordered, scowl blackening in hatred.

"It shall be done, my lord."

"You are to use any method you see fit, but you are to remain unseen. I do not want your presence made known until the proper time."

"Yes, my lord."

The Sith Lord regarded his servant quietly for a moment. "Should you be seen, it is of no great consequence in the Outer Rim territories. Kill any who sees you, be it Rebel or Imperial."

"Yes, my lord." There was no hesitation in the reply. It pleased the Emperor all the more.

"I want the scalps of the Rebels," Sidious growled, becoming engorged with hate the more he thought of those who had defied him. "If you find Jedi, I want them exterminated immediately. You may keep their lightsabers as trophies."

"Yes, my lord."

"You will be given a ship with which to travel, as well as two of my own clone guards to escort you and to report to me should you fail." His servant bowed his head even deeper in acceptance before the Sith sensed a question. "You may speak."

"Would not droids be better for such an operation as this, my lord?"

Sidious thought of the request. It would be better to have droids go along this time as it was harder for them to betray secrets. But then, it would be harder for droids to mask his servant's presence while in the palace. The Force stirred around him, telling him of the importance of keeping all of his servants close by, that soon, all would be needed.

"No," the Emperor snapped. "Too long have you relied on droids. Two of my guards will accompany you. They will not question your continued existence. I will see to that."

Another deep bow. "As you wish, my lord."

A dark smile appeared on the Sith's face. "It would also seem that Senators' Organa and Mothma have gone missing as of late. There will be a great reward for you should you bring them back to me. The three of us are long overdue for a...talk."

As he chuckled darkly, he just heard the obedient answer from the kneeling figure. This time, he would no longer be lenient with the Rebels. Vader had been right, it was time to crush the Rebellian. And he would see to it by using the only other creature that could inspire great fear into the heart and minds of the populous besides his late apprentice.

"Rise," the Emperor commanded, watching with grim satisfaction as the creature rose to his full height. He towered over most beings, even Lord Vader could not match him in height. "Go and fulfill your duties and regain a place by my side."

"All will be as you have commanded, your highness," General Grievous bowed deeply.

And with that, Sidious watched as the cyborg stalked out of the throne room, his mechanical body chinked against the stone floors. Yes, all would be as he had commanded. Sidious would see to it, even if he had to turn the entire galaxy upside down to do it.

## 39. Epiphany

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The days following the rescue, Padmé found herself falling into a certain rhythm with the Lars family. They were good, decent people that worked extremely hard for their living, but shared what meager things they possessed with others. She found out that she was staying at a moisture farm, and often found Cliegg and Owen gone in the mornings, as well as alternatively Shmi or Beru. One of the Lars women stayed behind with their guests and to cook lunch and dinner for the others who came in utterly exhausted. They had droids, she's been told, but even with seven or eight droids, it didn't seem to be enough help for the small family of four.

Padmé wanted to help, but knew her duty was to sit with Vader as he recovered. It was troubling that he hadn't woken from his fever. The fever would break, but almost instantly be back again, which scared the senator more than she wanted to admit. As he slept in an almost unnatural like sleep, the Sith would moan and sometimes cry out, as if trapped in a nightmare. Nothing she did seemed to soothe him. Instead, he would yell and occasionally call out for his mother, as he had when still in Mos Espa. He did much the same when Beru was with him. But when Shmi sat with him, she reported that the Sith would repeatedly mumble that he was sorry. Whenever the older woman would touched him, too, Vader would thrash about wildly, screaming for her to stop.

The wound itself was healing remarkably well, faster than what it was supposed to, actually. Beru had noticed it first, and started asking questions. Padmé, realizing that Vader was apparently well enough to start healing himself, denied knowing what was happening, only telling them vaguely that he had always just been a fast healer. She didn't want to give them any reason to know that they were dealing with a Force-user. There was no way she could tell them that this was, in fact, Darth Vader, and with the Empire's propaganda about Jedi, she wasn't willing to risk a case of mistaken identity. Though the thoughtful look on Shmi's face worried her a little.

But the fever persisted, even with the wounds all but healed. And while she worried about Vader, Padmé was forced to begin worrying about herself. Before Naboo, she'd wondered if she was coming down with something, only to dismiss the idea of being sick, believing her nausea, fatigue, and general feelings of illness were due to stress. That had seemed very likely. Yet while she stayed with the Lars', she began to feel worse and worse. She began throwing up again, sometimes to the point where she had nothing left inside and would just dry heave.

She would wake up feeling terrible, begin to feel better, only to lapse back into nausea on and off throughout the day. Of course Shmi and Beru were right there to help her and take care of her, but it didn't ease Padmé's concern. It made her wonder, if she was really sick, did that mean Vader was too? Was that why he hadn't woken up yet? Was he able to heal his wounds while he couldn't dispel a sickness? She wasn't sure how it worked for Force users.

Several days after their arrival on the farm, the senator was having a rather good morning, not feeling too ill and decided to sit in the kitchen with Shmi to drink tea while the others

were out working. Since Vader's condition never worsened, though didn't get better, they felt all right with leaving him alone for small periods of time. His care was beginning to weigh upon them all, even the men, who would have to lift the Sith at times while the women checked his bacta patches and changed the bedding he'd soaked through from fever.

It had been a rather calm morning, calm enough where Padmé felt well enough to eat a little as she drank her tea. The night before had been one of the best Vader had had since they arrived, and he was resting peacefully, his fever once again broken for the time being.

Lost in thought, the senator found herself musing out loud. "I wonder why he hasn't woken," she murmured.

Beside her, Shmi frowned, appearing thoughtful. "It could be a different kind of fever than what we suspect," she replied after a pause.

"What do you mean?" the senator frowned, once again turning over in her mind every possibility the fever could mean.

"I mean, the fever could not be connected to the wound at all," the other woman replied carefully. "Sometimes, after traumatic experiences, the mind becomes so troubled that it must reset itself, leading to physical manifestations, which could take a form such as fever. I've seen it once, years ago."

Hearing this, Padmé's heart leapt in her throat. The brain was resetting itself... Was Vader going to wake up... different? She wasn't sure what Shmi meant, but it sounded just as promising as much as it did terrifying. She hoped the Sith wasn't blocking out recent memories, and would forget about everything that had happened to them, or between them. It would be hard to explain why he didn't have a helmet on or why they were on Tatooine. She had no doubt that he'd take his frustrations out on everyone here, and she wasn't sure she'd be able to stop him.

"Hmm," was the only response the senator was able to give. Thinking back, she remembered hearing about trauma victims herself that simply shut down for a while in an attempt to cope with what happened. Again, she hoped Vader's apparent reboot wouldn't have a negative effect on everyone here.

They fell into a comfortable silence, each in their own thoughts. Over the past few days, Padmé had come to deeply respect everyone in the Lars family, but Shmi most of all. There was just something about Shmi that bespoke of quiet wisdom and remarkable goodness. She just knew she could trust Shmi with anything. The older woman was so calm and warm that no matter how jittery Padmé became, the other woman was always there to soothe her fears with easy words. When she became ill, it was always Shmi there first to comfort her, rubbing her back and letting her know it would all be okay.

After several moments, however, Shmi broke the silence, asking, "How old is Arlo?"

Looking up, Padmé felt a twinge of embarrassment. "I don't really know for sure," she admitted knowing she could trust the other woman. "I think he's in his early twenties."

The Lars matriarch nodded. "He's so young. It's a shame he's had such a hard life."

Padmé nodded. A hard life, Vader must have had. Being enslaved by Palpatine and beaten. But then again, he was Heir to the Galactic Empire. He was the Emperor's Right Hand. He



was the one that planned all the military campaigns and rushed into battle to kill and destroy everything in his path. It was tempting to want to believe that the Sith had been forced to do it, that it had all been completely against his will, but Padmé knew better than that. She knew for a fact that Vader committed crimes against humanity for the sheer fact that he wanted to do it. The Emperor might have told him where to go, but Vader went freely. Again, the contradictions surrounding the Sith confused the senator's feelings about him more than she wanted it to.

When the younger woman didn't speak for a little bit, Shmi began another topic, her voice gentle as she began. "I don't mean to pry," she began carefully, but Padmé gave her a smile to let her know it was all right to proceed. "—but are you and he... a couple?"

The heat coming from her face told Padmé she was blushing. "Well... we sort of... and... It's complicated," she murmured a bit embarrassed. Still, after all this time, she wasn't sure what to make of what she had with Vader. It was certainly a relationship, but as to what kind, it was not completely known to even her.

"I don't mean to pry," Shmi said again quickly. "It's just that... you've been rather unwell."

Sighing, the younger woman nodded. "Yes. It's been an on again off again sort of thing for a while now," she admitted.

The other woman frowned. "How long?"

The question was rather tricky. How long had she felt like this? Padmé tried to think back to when it had all started. She couldn't really say. Things had been happening rather rapidly lately, and with so much going on, she hadn't had time to stop and worry about herself getting sick. The nausea she'd been feeling had been around for a while, as well as the headaches. Tiredness followed, but that was still hard to differentiate between true fatigue and the fatigue brought on by illness. The same could be said of her loss of appetite.

"I don't really know," she confessed. "Lately I've just been so busy with... things, I haven't had much time to really stop and worry about it."

Shmi gave her a knowing look, one that Padmé wasn't so sure she liked, before nodding. "I see... Have you ever stopped to think that maybe you might be pregnant?"

The galaxy seemed to stop turning. Staring down at her stomach, Padmé gently touched it with trembling hands even as it felt as though it had dropped to the floor. No. It couldn't be! She wasn't... was she? It all made so much sense, yet not at all. "Well I don't think..." she trailed off, unable to think of a clear rebuttal. Could she really be pregnant? Her mind seemed to shut down, even as it struggled to continue processing.

"I didn't mean to distress you," a warm hand was placed over the senator's own, causing the younger to look up. "It's just that you've been displaying all the signs."

"I-I have, haven't I?" she muttered, looking back down at her stomach in complete shock. Why hadn't she thought of his possibility before?! She felt suddenly very cold.

Again, Shmi nodded patiently, before asking quietly, "Would you like to find out for sure?"

No, in fact, Padmé didn't really. She wanted to forget this conversation had ever occurred. She wanted to go back into blissful ignorance and never speak of the thought of pregnancies again. Yet she needed confirmation or she knew she would drive herself insane now that the idea had been planted in her head. Even though she didn't want to see the results, she needed to. The signs had all been there, though overshadowed by the business surrounding her life. Had she just been able to stop a moment and think about herself for once, she might have suspected... but there had been no time, and now that the idea had come up...

"A-all right," she mumbled, standing up along with Shmi, who showed her to the 'fresher and dug around a cabinet. Had she not been so shocked, Padmé might have been proud at how well she was dealing with the life altering possibility.

"I'm sure Beru won't mind if you use one of her tests," the other woman smiled kindly. Padmé nodded numbly. "I know she and Owen are wanting to start a family soon."

"That's wonderful." Her voice came out sound hallow and devoid of any real emotion. "I'm sure Beru will make a wonderful mother."

Shmi gave her a worried look, but smiled anyway. "Yes. I know she will," she replied simply as she continued to dig around until she found what she was looking for. 'Here you are,' she said gently, as though speaking to a startled animal that would bolt at any given moment. "You can call me if you need any help."

Again, Padme nodded in a daze, taking the small test and waited until Shmi left the 'fresher. It was a rather primitive manner to check pregnancy, but then, the senator knew that the people here were not as wealthy as they were on Coruscant or Naboo. Technology was at least twenty years behind on Tatooine from the Core. This was an old, yet accurate way.

So, reading the instructions, Padmé gave herself the test and waited as it processed. Sitting down on the floor, leaning against the cabinet, she curled up in a ball, praying that she wasn't pregnant, even though her instincts were screaming at her that she was. This couldn't be happening. It shouldn't have been allowed to happen. She'd been on contraceptives before making her initial deal with Vader. Surely this was all in her head, she had just been too stressed and was just ill and Shmi— bless her heart— had misinterpreted the signs. There was no way she was pregnant, and no way Darth Vader was about to become a father!

After three minutes, she took a deep breath and turned towards the test. Peeling open her eyes, she stared down at the results, only to feel her stomach drop again. Positive. It was positive. She was pregnant.

A sob escaped her before she realized what had happened and she sank back down on the floor, curling up into a tight ball, crying. How could she have been so stupid? How could she have let this happen? While logically she knew it took two to tango, she also knew that this time, it was primarily her fault since she'd been the one to engage Vader in the deal of sex. He hadn't been interested before, but she'd lured him in. Of course he could have always said no!...But then she'd tempted him. And now... now what?

A soft knock at the door did nothing to bring her out of her misery, and a moment later, Shmi reentered. The older woman took one look at the scene, and sat down beside the senator, wrapping her arms around her again, the same as she had the first night she'd been there.

“Oh, my dear,” she rocked her back and forth. “Why are you crying? This is wonderful news!”

“I-It’s not s-so won-derful,” Padmé wept.

The more she thought about it, the more horrible the situation seemed. She was impregnated by Darth Vader. Would this baby have strange Force powers too? Would it be as evil as its father? She’d pondered over having Vader’s children once before, but hadn’t liked the conclusions she’d come up with then and she wasn’t coming up with any better ones now. But then, at least she knew the child wasn’t going to be a strange hybrid, one that she wouldn’t know anything about. Now that she knew Vader was human, the prospect of his spawn eating her from the inside out like some terrible horror holo was even less likely. But still, what sort of person would Darth Vader’s child be like? Would it grow to be just like him; cold, cruel, and callous?

She suddenly felt someone pulling her higher, and turning red eyes up, Padmé found Shmi helping her to stand. Padmé allowed herself to be taken from the bathroom, and together, the two women sat back down at the kitchen table. Shmi poured her some more tea, even as the younger woman tried to scrub her eyes of tears, trying to deny what she’d just learned. Both were proving to be too difficult.

“Dormé.” Looking over, Padmé once more found compassionate eyes resting upon her. “It’s all right. Having children is one of the most wonderful things that can happen to a person.”

Trembling slightly, the senator looked down at her lap. “I just... H-he won’t want to be a father,” she whispered, closing her eyes. “H-he can’t know about this.”

Had she been looking at Shmi, she might have seen the older woman’s confused, dubious expression, but she knew that the farmer would not understand, and so didn’t bother to look. “How do you know he won’t want to be the baby’s father if you don’t tell him?” she asked gently.

“You don’t know him like I do,” Padmé found herself repeating the age-old cliché. “He’s not the sort of man that will settle down and want a family, children!... or a wife,” she concluded sadly. The last thought hurting just a little bit more than the others.

They were silent for a few moments before Shmi took Padmé’s hand once more. “I know from what you’ve told me that he might be a little... rough around the edges, and I can see that he’s had a difficult past. But Dormé, have you ever stopped to consider that maybe he might just want a family because of those reasons? That perhaps it’s something he’s yearned for his entire life?”

The senator sat still, stunned. Darth Vader was not a father figure. He wasn’t fit to even bear children. Despite watching him change, he was still cruel, still a Sith Lord. What would he think should he find out she was pregnant? Would he really want to marry her? Want to start this family with her? Fall madly in love with her and renounce all evil? While what Shmi had said made some sense, it would have applied so much better had they not been speaking of Vader. Hoping for the Sith to actually harbor such sentiments was utterly ridiculous.

Sith Lords did not have families. They did not like children and would certainly not want any part in raising younglings. They were impatient and demanding by nature and nothing short of evil. Children were simply necessary annoyances which had to be tolerated to exist in order to breed future subjects. That was all. Siths simply did not want anything to do with children themselves.

And yet... Vader had had a family once, or at least a mother. He called for her, even after becoming the monster he was, with such longing it broke Padmé's heart. He stayed close to her, too, had watched over Padmé with almost parental-like concern at times. He had taken care for her when she'd been drunk, saved her life when a rogue rebel had attacked, and saved her again when he thought a Jedi would attack, and throughout the battle. He'd shielded her from the explosion on the escape pod and must have somehow protected and controlled the pod to get them into Tatooine's orbit. A Sith Lord would not do any of these things, yet Vader had. He protected her not just because his master had ordered him to, but because he cared.

But that didn't mean he wanted children. He'd told her that there would be no women in his life after her, but that didn't mean what he said was true, she thought stubbornly, resisting to urge to fall farther into love and trust. As the Heir to the Empire, he would logically have to obtain an heir himself. But the question now became whether Vader was the child of Palpatine, or had Palpatine adopted Vader as an heir? The two Siths looked absolutely nothing alike, as far as Padmé was concerned, which led her to believe that Vader had become an adopted heir after a time. Would he want to do the same one day when it became his time to rule, or did he want his own progeny?

Would she even allow him near this child? The more she thought about it, the more scared Padmé became. She couldn't let a Sith Lord near her baby. Vader's emotions were not stable and she knew it. One moment he was rather calm, the next he could fly into a fit of rage. It made sense that he would do such things if he had been abused at one point in his life, subjected to such tortures while growing up, but that did not excuse the behavior he now displayed. If allowed to be near a child, would he abuse it too? Would he scar it just as much as he had been scarred?

Despite her misgivings of the child itself, Padmé knew she would do anything to protect this baby. She had always had a soft heart when it came to children. While having the child of Darth Vader terrified her, she knew she couldn't abort it, so for better or worse, she would raise the baby, not just for the sake of preserving a life, but also because it would be a part of him. There had always been a small part of Padmé that had wanted to have Vader's children, and this baby was her chance at fulfilling that secret desire. She loved him, and she would protect his child. It was up to her to raise the child in the way of goodness, and maybe, just maybe, it would not be born evil. Perhaps it really was nurture over nature, or so she prayed it was so. Old proverbs always warned against judging children for the sins of their fathers, after all.

But didn't the child deserve to know its father? Would it even be possible to hide this baby from Vader? Should she run from him, something told the senator that he would follow, that he would hunt her down until she was once again within his possession. Hiding the fact that she'd have a child would be extremely difficult. And there was still the question of Force sensitivity. Should the child possess the strange powers Padmé was certain Vader would sense

it. That's how he killed all those Jedi, how he could hunt them down with little to no tracks at all. He had told her once that had she been Force sensitive he would have killed her on the spot. Would he do the same to the child, even if it was his own? All evidence pointed to Vader not caring who or what a being was, that he would kill it, yet recently, Padmé wasn't so sure. He had proven to be uncommonly loyal.

Coming out of her reserve, Padmé sighed, running a shaking hand through her hair. This was not something she'd wanted to have to deal with. But apparently the Force hadn't believed she'd had enough to worry about recently and added pregnancy on to the list of things that confused and turned her world upside down.

"Please don't tell him," she replied at last, surprised at how calm her voice came out. Shmi gave her a look of disappointment, forcing Padmé to continue. "—at least not when he wakes up," she sighed. "I... still have to think a few things through before I want him to... find out."

The older woman nodded, smiling warmly. "Of course." There was a pause before Shmi spoke up again. "Having a child really is one of the most amazing experiences in the world. Despite all the discomfort and pain, when you first hold your little one in your arms..." a blissful smile appeared across the older woman's features. "There's really nothing like it, Dormé."

Despite her precarious situation, Padmé found herself smiling in response to the love she could sense from the other woman. "So I've been told. What was Owen like as a baby?"

The smile dissolved quickly from Shmi's face, and for a moment, the senator was alarmed that she might have said something wrong, but the farm-wife forced another smile on quickly, though Padmé detected a fair amount of sorrow. "I'm afraid I don't know," the other woman replied slowly. "I'm not Owen's biological mother. I first met him when he was fifteen."

Surprised, Padmé felt her face drain of color as the realization of what Shmi was not saying dawned on her. "Oh. I-I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"It's all right," Shmi smiled, her face appearing strained. "You didn't know. I... I don't mind talking about my son."

Forcing her own smile, the younger woman nodded, not really knowing what else to do. But sensing that the other woman needed to speak, Padmé was only too willing to listen for a change. It was her turn to comfort. Besides, it might, perhaps, take her mind away from her own concern over having a child. Maybe she would gain new insights into motherhood from the wizened woman.

"Anakin... that was his name," a sad, but very proud smile came over Shmi as her eyes took on a faraway expression, 'was always a very special child. I remember when he was first born,' she laughed, a melancholy sort of sound. "He was so tiny. I remember just holding him and thinking, 'How can he be so perfect?' I don't know how many times I counted his little fingers and toes just to make sure they were all there."

Even with all of her concerns and anxiety, Padmé found herself smiling warmly at the image of Shmi with a little baby. She found herself going back to when her nieces were just born, amazed at how small and utterly perfect they had been. It was nothing compared to a mother's pride, she was sure, but the senator could image, could almost understand.

“He was such a good baby, too,” Shmi went on. ‘After the first few months, he slept pretty well through the night, and was usually very quiet. He was such a happy little thing, too!’ She laughed again, this time, it didn’t sound so bitter, but was very nearly a true, happy laugh. “The first time he smiled at me, I’d thought I couldn’t’ve loved him more before that, but I was wrong. He had the most beautiful smile.”

“What was he like?” Padmé dared to ask.

The older woman didn’t seem distressed by the question at all, and instead, only smiled all the more tenderly. “He was like a little angel,” she beamed. “He had the blondest hair I’ve ever seen, with the biggest blue eyes that always seemed to sparkle. They were such a unique color. So bright.”

Images of such a child sprang to Padmé’s mind, forming a sweet picture. And even though she was truly listening to her companion, she couldn’t help but wonder now that she had calmed a bit what her own child would look like. Vader was, after all, blonde, and a part of the senator found herself yearning for such a child as Shmi had had. A sweet little boy with blonde hair and blue eyes with a bright smile.

The joy that the farmer displayed melted away once more, and a deep longing and sadness replaced it as she continued her tale. “Anakin... died when he was four-years-old.” A lump formed in the senator’s throat. She couldn’t even image the pain of losing a child, and so reached out to take Shmi’s hand. The older woman took it with a grateful smile, before continuing. “You see, Anakin was... special, and I’m not just saying that strictly out of parental pride. He had this... gift. He was extremely mechanically inclined. When he was just three he could take apart a moisture vaporator and put it back together again without help.”

“So young?” the younger woman couldn’t help but interrupt.

Shmi smiled dejectedly. “Yes. It was how we ended up eventually being sold to Watto—the one you had asked for help when Owen and Beru found you.”

Padmé reeled back in disgust. “That thing owned you?”

“Yes,” the farm-wife chuckled. “He was a decent master. Much kinder than Gardulla the Hutt. But Watto, as you’ve seen, is quite greedy, and when he realized Anakin’s talent, he had him working in the shop fixing any and all the junk that came in while I was sent to do errands or work at cleaning items brought in.

“And then one day, a man sold Watto a podracer.” Shmi’s darkening features told Padmé she would have to steel herself. “It was just like any other day. Watto was having Anakin look at the racer, and I was inside polishing metal, watching him. It was nearly time for lunch and I went out to get him. He told me he would come in five minutes. It was nothing unusual, nothing looked any different than it normally did...”

There was a long stretch of silence.

“When I turned around,” Shmi took a shaky breath, ‘I had only walked about a two meters away when the pod exploded.’ Padmé gasped. “I don’t remember much after that. I was very badly hurt from the explosion, and Watto either couldn’t afford to or wouldn’t spend the money to help me. I asked him about Anakin and he told me my son had been killed from the blast,” a single tear fell from the warm brown eyes. “That’s about the time Cliegg found me.

He saw how badly I was hurt and bought me. He brought me back here, and he and Owen heal me up. He allowed me to work for him, even though he had freed me, so I could have a place to stay and earn an income.”

“I’m so sorry, Shmi,” Padmé breathed, unable to image the hell this woman had gone through, losing a child she obviously adored.

“I took me a year to get over Anakin’s death and move on with my life. But I did,” Shmi sighed. “In part. I married Cliegg a little over a year later, and I’ve forged a new life out here. But I’ll always remember and miss my little Annie.”

Unable to stop herself, the younger woman wrapped her arms around her hostess and hugged the woman close. It was her turn to give comfort, after all, and her heart bled for the older woman. She didn’t say anything, didn’t know what to say, but she hoped her presence was enough, and that Shmi knew how grateful she was to be entrusted with such a painful memory. Had something so terrible happened to her, Padmé honestly wasn’t sure she’d ever be able to speak of it or move on.

When they finally pulled away, Shmi was smiling again. “Not a day goes by that I don’t miss my son,” she said quietly. “He was completely unexpected, but truly a blessing. I hope that you will realize this about your own child much sooner than I did about mine.”

Padmé almost scoffed. There was no way that Shmi could have taken her child for granted or could have loved him less than she did at this moment. It was not in the nature of the older woman. The former slave was being too hard on herself, but the senator also knew she was making a point.

Touching her own stomach again, the young woman peered down at her still rather flat belly. “I know children are a blessing,” she murmured, and deep down, she always believed this child would be, it had just been the shock and fear getting in the way of what should have been one of the happiest moments of her life. “And I promise you that I’ll take good care and love this child as much as I am physically able.”

“I know you will, my dear. I know you will.”

As the two shared a smile, they were interrupted by the sound of boots come back into the house. “Time to make dinner,” Shmi gave her a knowing look. “And I won’t say anything until you’re ready.”

“Thank you,” Padmé beamed. “Maybe I’ll go check on Arlo,” she muttered as she stood up. She needed some time to think, to adjust to everything that she’d learned today.

And so, as she walked back into the room she was staying in, she thought over what this child did and would mean for her while Vader slept on. Even at dinner, while the others talked around her, Padmé kept silent, musing and planning. When she said her goodnights to the Lars family, and went back into the room, she stayed up late into the night, still thinking.

She ended up falling asleep while sitting beside Vader. So she was completely oblivious when a pair of dark blue eyes snapped open a few hours later.

## 40. Mother and Son

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When Vader woke, the first thing he noticed was that he was not wearing his helmet or suit and armor. After processing this, he laid still, doing a quick survey of his body. Carefully, he moved each limb, quietly assessing any damage he may have sustained. His entire body gave off a dull ache, but it was hardly life threatening, and he was used to such feelings. They did not bother him. Apparently he was still whole and in one piece, save, he noted, for his left arm. The mechanical arm had been either taken off or destroyed since he couldn't get a feel of it being there, though there were still phantom sensations that lingered.

The next thing he turned his mind to was his location. He was not in the palace or military base, he knew that for certain. Had he been, he would have woken up to sterile, white walls and an ice cold metal operating table. He was not on one of those now. For the first time in many, many years, he was lying in a bed of some sort. Or at least a cot. And he actually had pillows and blankets to cover him.

It did not make the Sith comfortable. He felt extremely exposed and disoriented. The room was dark, and there was a small window allowing in some light, telling him that it was night time. An image flashed in his mind of someone snuggling up into his side, shiver, pulling a cloak around themselves and him more securely.

Padmé. He was on Tatooine with Padmé. He could remember that much, could remember sitting outside a building while the senator tried to get help. What he could not recall was having gotten to someplace with a bed.

Turning his head, the Sith's eyes focused on a dark shape that was lying beside him. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, but when they did, he realized it was a head. It was Padmé, slumped forward, using the bed as a pillow while she sat in a chair beside him.

A wave of concern passed over the young man for her wellbeing. That did not look comfortable. It was probably hurting her back, too. Moving sluggishly, being careful not to make any sudden movements, Vader sat up. His body was stiff, but it wasn't anything he wasn't used to. As he tried to swing his feet over the edge of the bed, he came to realize that there was a chair on the end. It was quite obvious that the bed was far too small for him, and someone, probably Padmé, placed the chair on the end to make him more comfortable. They'd even put pillows down to cushion his legs. The kind gesture, however, only made the Sith feel all the more uncomfortable.

Eventually, when he was finally sitting up, Vader pushed himself up, standing on his feet in Force knows how long. He hunched his shoulders up, tensing, before allowing them to sag back down to stretch them, before rolling his neck around, and raising his arms up. When the stiffness lessened, he turned his attention back to the still sleeping senator.

An increasingly familiar ache in his chest returned as he gazed down at her. It was always there when he looked at her, but it seemed especially strong when he saw her sleeping. She looked so peaceful when sleeping, so lovely even in the darkness. As he stared at her, it



surprised Vader yet again to think that this woman was not already married. She was absolutely flawless in many respects, and he couldn't help but feel please that she was his.

With no left arm, Vader pondered for a moment on how to move her. Of course, as he started to wake up, still feeling uncommonly lethargic, he simply reached out his remaining hand and lifted her carefully with the Force, quietly berating himself as to why he hadn't thought of it before. She twitched in her sleep, now dressed in a strangely familiar style of brown gown, but did not wake up. And once she was settled in bed, he covered her up.

Her face was not as peaceful as he would have liked, though. The stress of everything that had happened to them must have been weighing heavily upon her. It angered the Sith. He was supposed to be the one looking after her, caring for her, not the other way around. He'd promised himself. And he'd failed.

The usually black hatred that usually swelled with such revelations oddly did not come. Instead, Vader felt as though there were a hole in his chest, leaving him grasping for something that just wasn't there. It unnerved him. He could always rely on the power of the Dark Side, but now that he could no longer feel its presence he felt naked, even more so than when he'd first taken off his helmet after crashing. He tried to make himself angry, to fuel the demanding fire of the Dark Side just to have the comfort of the known back, but he just couldn't.

Looking around the little clay room, a fearful shudder ran down his spine. This place was... too familiar. It reminded him far too much of a life he'd left behind long ago. A life he wasn't supposed to even remember.

The Force swirled around him, waffling over his sensing, bringing him out of his musings, like incense on the breeze. He felt something. A presence he'd not felt since...

No. He was not going down that path again. He couldn't. It was too painful. There was no way that presence could be real. It was just the lingering effects of his nightmares. The wounds he had sustained must have been serious enough to cause a fever, and because of the fever, he'd been trapped in hellish nightmares. He'd had strange, terrifying dreams, seeing the faces of beings he did not know, but knew he must have killed. They would point bloody fingers at him, accusing and condemning him. Vader had had such dreams before, but never so... profound. Usually he shook them off and did not care to think about them again, but now...

Guilt weighed heavily upon the Sith Lord. A guilt he wasn't supposed to be able to feel. Even now, he could still clearly recall his dreams, the faces of innocent men, women, and children being cut down by his 'saber. He tried to tell himself he didn't care, that they were insignificant, but that was a lie. For the first time in a very long time, Vader felt truly and wholly guilty.

The damn he had been fighting to keep intact for so long had finally burst free. His mental struggle between the Darkness and Light had finally broken him. He had finally gone insane. There was no other way to explain what was happening him. Why else would he feel so... trapped and helpless with guilt? Why else would he think he could sense the presence of someone who had died a long time ago?

Padmé's soft sigh brought Vader out of his reserve, and he stared down at the sleeping woman. He had failed her. Sorrow enveloped him, but he could not give up. He might be slipping into insanity, but Padmé would still need him if they were going to get off this planet. For her, he would fight to keep himself from falling into the crushing grief and guilt that threatened to pulled him in and drown him.

So, not knowing what else to do, the Sith knelt down before the bed and closed his eyes to meditate. Hopefully the Force had not forsaken him completely. Maybe he could come up with an answer to solve this.

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Padmé woke up with a jolt. She didn't know why she was suddenly just awake, but she was. Sitting up, she found it strange that she had been lying down. She didn't remember going to bed.

Looking over, she jumped, letting out a startled gasp, as she found herself staring into a pair of intense blue eyes. "Y-you're awake," she breathed, not knowing what to say, having been taken completely by surprise.

"You mumble in your sleep."

Padmé was completely floored by the reply as she stared at him flatly. The man had been in a fevered sleep for days, probably didn't know where he was or how he'd gotten here, and the first thing out of his mouth is an observation of her sleeping habits? The least she would have expected was him demanding to know what all had happened. In fact, it surprised her that he hadn't shaken her awake or something when he'd woken up to get answers.

Which brought her back to being confused. Why was she in Vader's bed? Had he... had he woken up and put her to bed? The un-Sith-like gesture had her heart hammering against her sternum, stirring up many emotions she wasn't quite ready to face and more that she couldn't decipher.

"Why did you..." she began before trailing off. She found herself staring at him, and he held her gaze evenly. "Your eyes are blue," she exclaimed rather stupidly.

The Sith cocked his head to the side ever so slightly. "They've always been blue."

If she had a credit for every time Darth Vader confused her in one manner or other, Padmé would have been the wealthiest woman in the galaxy. She was going to inform him that his eyes had, in fact, been a golden-red just several days ago, but stopped. As she continued to stare at him, and he at her, she realized that there was something very... different about him.

While she had not known Vader without his signature helmet and mask, Padmé had gotten to know the Sith well enough to read his body language. The usually ridged shoulders and straight back she remembered, while still present, were just... different. There seemed to be a certain lack of severity to his posture. His face, too, was oddly relaxed, though with a deep undercurrent of sadness. When she'd first seen him without his mask, it was as though he still had the damned thing still on. She couldn't read his face at all, and there was only anger and hatred underlying his features. Now... now she couldn't see that. Instead, the Sith looked... just... tired.

Sitting up and leaning forward, scared, Padmé slowly reached out to him, but stopped herself. He didn't necessarily like to be touched. She knew that. "Are you okay?" she asked gently.

Vader seemed to wince at the question, which startled her. The dark blue eyes snapped down, looking away. Darth Vader looked away first. The concern the senator had felt almost tripled. "Vader," she knelt down next to him. "What's wrong?"

He didn't reply. Instead, he stubbornly stared down at the floor. It was hard to read him as she'd never seen him like this before. In fact, there had been time she wasn't even sure he had any other emotions besides anger. She didn't know what to be looking for or what to expect.

"How do you feel?" she pressed, putting a little more force behind her voice, hoping to spark something in him.

Finally, he turned and looked her straight in the eyes before replying drily, "Hungry."

Padmé blinked before a sigh escaped her. She really ought to have known better. Trying to force Vader into anything was generally a bad idea. If he didn't want to do or say something, he wouldn't. That was just the sort of man he was. Though she supposed she should be grateful he was warming back up into the impossible man she'd gotten to know over the past several months.

"Hungry. Right," she sighed again, before standing. 'I think it's almost time for breakfast anyway. Here,' she walked over and grabbed his old shirt. Beru had washed and mended it as best she could since Vader wouldn't be able to borrow any clothes from Owen or Cliegg. "Put this on."

The Sith raised an eyebrow, but stood and slipped the black material on over his head. He still seemed a little distant, but Padmé hoped that once he had eaten something and come to terms with everything that had happened he would go back to acting a little more like himself.

Force help me, she thought wearily. I want him to act like Vader again. Will wonders never cease? Though she knew she should be careful. Lately the Force liked throwing surprises at her, showing her that there were plenty of wonders left to be had. But at least Vader seemed to remember their situation and what had happened.

As they walked to the door, she stopped him, earning another quizzical expression from the Sith. It was unnatural to see so much emotion, but she pushed the strangeness aside. "I told them my name was Dormé and yours was Arlo."

Vader's face went into what seemed to be his fall back expression of blank, but he nodded. Padmé almost asked him yet again if he was all right, but thought against it. He didn't want to talk right now, she shouldn't push him. After all, she pretty much knew everything else about him, she'd allow him to keep this secret for a little while longer.

As they walked into the kitchen, Padmé frowned, noticing Shmi wasn't back from picking mushrooms yet. She'd wanted the older woman here when Vader was introduced to everyone. Her presence would, the senator had no doubts, calm the Sith. The farm-wife might not have been a Force user, but she did seem to possess a strange power over everyone that forced comfort.

When the others looked up and saw Vader when he and the senator made it to the table, they all froze, staring at him with differing degrees of curiosity and wariness. Taking that as her cue, Padmé smiled at the family, lightly touching Vader's arm to bring his attention to her. "Arlo," she began gently. "This is Cliegg Lars, his son Owen, and Owen's wife, Beru."

"Pleased to meet you," Cliegg stood from the table and held out his hand.

It was almost physically painful to have to watch as Vader stared at the offered hand, but not react to it. "The Lars' have been kind enough to take us in and help take care of us," she prompted gently, hoping the hosts weren't too offended by their guest's lack of action.

With obvious reluctance, Vader finally took the older man's hand and shook it once before letting go. Again, Padmé thought it strange how much the Sith did not like being touched. Thinking back, she could not recall ever seeing Vader shake hands with anyone, so his reaction was within the norm for him. And she had learned a little of his past, as well, so it made sense. But it was still a little embarrassing. She wanted the Lars to like them, and Vader was quite good at making bad impressions.

Not surprisingly, Owen didn't offer his hand, and Beru smiled a bit shakily at the large man. "Good morning, Arlo," the blonde said amiably enough. "I hope you're feeling better."

It was quite obvious that Vader was unsure how to react as the look of uncertainty crossed his face. Perhaps it was the kindness being shown to him, or the distinct lack of total fear. It must be odd, Padmé mused. Everyone that she'd seen being introduced to the Sith was always nervous and completely terrified. For the first time in what must have been a long time, he was being treated like... well... a normal human being. He was not the Heir to the Empire here, not the all-powerful Sith Lord. What must that feel like for him?

Eventually, after a long pause, Vader slowly nodded his head, before taking a seat at the table when Cliegg gestured to it. Thankfully the Lars family appeared to write off the Sith's behavior as that of a still sick man, because they went back to their meals, offering him what food they had. And so, the family began their conversations again, talking about what they would be doing for the day. Life went on.

Sitting beside the newly woken man, Padmé watched him intently out of the corner of her eye. A part of her wondered if he could sense anything... different about her. Did he know she was pregnant? Was she showing? Was that why he'd been staring at her this morning when she'd woken up? The thought of him finding out right now was a little too much and Padmé had to admit that she wasn't sure she'd be able to bear it if he knew. Not yet.

Thankfully, however, Vader didn't seem interested in asking a lot of questions of her or anyone else, because the moment he had food before him, he began eating. It was strange, but Padmé realized she'd never seen him eat before. They'd been at a dinner party together when on Naboo, but, of course, he'd been wearing his mask and hadn't eaten. When was the last time he'd eaten in front of anyone, she wondered, as she examined his rather crude table manners. Holding a fork seemed somehow like the most awkward thing in the world when he did it. Thankfully, the Lars either didn't seem to notice or didn't care.

After a few minutes had passed, the fork that had been teetering dangerously in Vader's hand, fell with a loud clang onto the plate. Everyone turned their attention to the Sith, but disturbingly, Vader's attention wasn't on his food anymore. In fact, his head was completely

turned towards the hall, his neck strained to look out to the door. Padmé wondered at it until she heard the outside door open.

“Oh, that’ll be my wife, Shmi,” Cliegg explained to his jumpy guest.

Vader’s head snapped back around so fast, it was a wonder it didn’t break. A panicked, yet pained expression passed over the Sith’s face as he stared at his host, the color draining from his face at an alarming rate. “Shmi?” his voice came out like a dry croak.

Once more, the name twinged in the back of Padmé’s mind. When Vader said the name, it was much more important somehow. His pale face told her that he knew the name as well. But where...?

The senator’s eyes snapped open, her mind suddenly flooding with realization. For the first time since waking up on Tatooine, she felt like suddenly everything made sense. She’d seen the name on the carving she’d found in Vader’s room, the same design as a lot of what she’d seen on Tatooine. Vader was from Tatooine and so was Shmi. Vader was surprisingly young, but highly skilled and excellent with machines. He’d been calling out for his mother, even reaching out to Watto with a plea. Shmi had lost a son sixteen years ago, who had been owned by Watto and was good with mechanics. Vader had jewelry with Shmi’s name...

The color drained from the young woman’s face as well as she turned to stare at her companion. No... it couldn’t be... It was too much of a coincidence! “Vader?” she whispered, placing a hand on his arm.

The Sith, however, didn’t respond, and instead stared with wide eyes as Shmi Lars walked into the room. He had been pale before, but the moment he saw the older woman, he looked whiter than the snows of Hoth. He even started to tremble ever so slightly as he just sat staring.

For her part, when Shmi saw Vader sitting with the family, she seemed quite surprised, but put on that easy smile of hers as she set down her basket of mushrooms. “Good morning,” she greeted, before a small frown came to her lips. “Are you all right? How are you feeling?”

Vader’s trembling became more noticeable as he began shaking his head, a painfully confused expression crossing his features. “It... can’t be!” he whispered. “Y-You’re not here. You’re dead!”

The entire Lars family had fallen silent and were gawking at Vader in surprise and suspicion. Shmi, however, seemed shocked as she looked over the young man before her intently. “Dead?” her voice sounded incredulous, though it shook ever so slightly. “Why would you think I’m dead when I—”

“Because I killed you!”

The room went still and there seemed to be no sound at all. As the initial shock wore off, Padmé grabbed Vader’s arm again, more intently. “Please,” she pleaded, but he didn’t seem to hear her.

Instead, the Sith shook off the hand, before turning haunted eyes upon the senator. It scared Padmé. Darth Vader wasn’t supposed to look like that. It was supposed to be impossible. Once more, she found herself wishing for the old Vader back. At least then she’d know he was in control and she could predict his actions better.

“Is she real?”

The question noticeably surprised everyone, but Vader either did not notice or ignored it. Instead, he continued his steady, burning gaze upon Padmé who found herself nodding numbly. He looked so... confused and hurt. She wasn't sure how to help him.

But he apparently didn't want her to. Instead, the Sith Lord rose to his full height and walked slowly towards Shmi. Both Owen and Cliegg had risen as well, afraid what the obviously distressed man would do, but Shmi did not back away. She continued to stare at Vader, her own perplexity evident, even as it was clear her mind was whirling, trying to fit the pieces of the confusing, messed up puzzle together.

Everyone watched anxiously as the Sith Lord raised his hand to the older woman, but paused just before he could touch her. Shmi appeared frightened, but did not move, just gazed up into the young man's face. Once more, Vader shook his head in disbelief. “I killed you. You're dead.”

Still horribly confused, Shmi shook her head. “No.” It was apparent she wasn't sure what else to say. But slowly, Padmé came to understand everything better. The guilt she'd seen in Vader when she'd woken, the guilt he expressed in his sleep, the explosion Shmi had told her about the day before: Vader blamed himself.

It was almost without warning when Vader's hand, having still been poised, finally reached out and touched the Lars woman's face. The instant he did, the shock he'd been placed under shattered. And so did he.

Padmé Naberrie Amidala watched in shocked awe as Darth Vader, the Dark Lord of the Sith, broke down. It was almost unnoticeable at first as he hung his head low, his chin to his chest, as his trembling slowly became shaking. It was when his shoulders began their violent shaking that the senator realized he was crying. And it was only when his legs gave out and he was kneeling before Shmi that Padmé realized just how hard he was weeping, despite there being no sound.

For her part, Shmi appeared concerned and still truly confused, with even a small hint of dread hidden under the surface. But there was also curiosity and suspicion that told Padmé that the older woman was probably finally coming to all the right conclusions. Cliegg tried to walk around the table to his wife, but the senator stopped him. She received a hard glare, but ignored it. While she, too, wanted nothing more than to run over and separate the two before things became... explosive— at least where Vader was concerned— she also knew that this needed to be resolved. Now.

Vader, through the tears, keep mumbling what sounded like apologizes, and it tore at Padmé's heart. Her instincts told her to wait, however, and remain still, so she did. Despite wanting to help, this really was between him and Shmi. This time, she could not interfere.

At last, Shmi's eyes snapped open wide, her expression strangely unreadable. Carefully, the older woman reached out gently and tilted Vader's head up, forcing the Sith to look at her. His eyes were squeezed shut tightly and he flinched at the touch. But even as a hurt look crossed the woman's face, she did not let go. In the most tender voice Padmé had ever heard, Shmi finally spoke. “Anakin?”

Shockingly bright blue eyes snapped open, and Padmé found herself gasping lightly. Those eyes... It was really true. Vader was really Anakin, Shmi's son. Those eyes were exactly as the older woman had described them. So clear, bright... yet cold, dead. He was not the same boy that Shmi remembered. How could he be? The young man before her now was scarred and tortured. His expression was still haunted, as though he couldn't make up his mind if this was really real or another nightmare.

But as he looked into his mother's eyes, Shmi trembling, Vader spoke more clearly. "I'm s-so sorry."

Shmi's arms were instantly around Vader's neck as she hugged him as close as she could, crying into his neck, despite the awkwardness of their positions. "Ani! My little Ani!" she cried, turning and kissing him anywhere she could; on his cheeks, his forehead, his jaw.

Beside her, Padmé could tell that the rest of the Lars family was still completely shell shocked from this revelation. Cliegg looked between his wife and her estranged son in absolute bewilderment. He turned to her, as if she could help him, but in all honesty, the senator was just about as lost as the rest of them. With everything else that had gone on in her life, she'd been too busy to see what had been clearly before her and so had not prepared for this event. Her lip twitched involuntary as she vaguely wondered if that was some sort of Jedi proverb, picturing the old Protectors of the Old Republic scolding her for not 'clearing her mind.'

As the reunion calmed, and Vader once more appeared more in control of himself, he pulled away from his mother, though Shmi did not let go. It was disconcerting, however, to notice that as Shmi was beaming, tears still streaking down her face, Vader appeared... less than pleased. In fact, he seemed to be almost in pain.

"This is a miracle!" Shmi exclaimed not yet noticing her son's expression in her joy. "I never... how did you... I'd thought..." She laughed a bright, airy sound, pulling her son to her again. "Oh Anakin! I just can't believe it!"

Once more the Sith pulled away, his frown marring the touching scene. Had anyone else found their long lost mother, the senator was certain they would be acting similarly to how Shmi was behaving, yet Vader seemed... distant. There was an oddly fearful look about his face, and still so much guilt.

Noticing this at last, Shmi's own smile melted away as she looked into the face of her son, cupping his face in her hands. "Anakin? What's wrong? I'm here! This is real. And now everything's going to be all right, Anakin."

Something shifted within the Sith at that moment, Padmé could feel it. His eyes narrowed and his face began dropping any hint of emotions. Fear jumped in her throat as she was suddenly worried that the Sith Lord had returned. While finding his mother must have been a rather life-altering event after the trauma that they had been through, he was still Darth Vader. And the senator knew, while the others didn't, that Darth Vader was not one to take surprises well. From her experiences, surprises for him were often met with violent outbursts.

Standing up to his full height, towering over his mother, Vader stared down at her with hard eyes, his face once again masked with severity. "That name," he began, his voice quiet, but biting, "no longer has any meaning for me."

Padmé's heart once again broke at the expression on Shmi's face. It was so confused, horrified, and so very lost. Finally, unable to stand it, the senator walked over to the two, not sure what she would do, but feeling better to be close should one of them need her. The Lars, too, gathered more closely.

"Wh-what?" Shmi's quiet question cut right to the heart. "An—"

"Do not say that name," Vader looked away, glaring down at the floor, guilt bleeding into his controlled expression. "That boy died. A very long time ago."

Shmi looked absolutely devastated, and Padmé couldn't think of a being in the galaxy that wouldn't sympathize with her. "N-no," she shook her head. "No. You're alive. You're my son, and you're alive, right here with me."

The muscles in Vader's shoulders tensed, and he looked wound tighter than a coil, just waiting to snap. It was hard to image just what exactly was going through his mind, especially since the initial shock had worn off, but Padmé could still tell that the Sith was confused. She could feel chaotic emotions wafting from off of him. Being so lost was not something that Vader was used to or tolerated, and this situation had done something no one else in the galaxy would think possible; it had completely broken the Sith, taking him by surprise.

"No," Vader responded quietly. His face was still stark, but there was just a hint of an undertone that bespoke of regret and sadness. That's what Shmi latched on to.

"Yes, yes you are," she spoke quickly, touching her son's arm, forcing him to look at her, even as he flinched away. It obviously hurt the mother to know her own child couldn't bear her touch, but she pressed on, a determined expression firmly on her face. 'You are my son, Anakin.' He winced at the name. "You're my son, and no words can describe how overjoyed I am to see you alive. I've thought about you every day since that awful accident, and I've missed you terribly. You're my son," she repeated, tears in her eyes, "and I love you."

The Sith's face went completely slack as he stared down at his mother. Both his expression and his eyes appeared to just suddenly die, and it worried Padmé. It was as though he had been overloaded, and his entire system shut down before more damage could be done.

But he remained standing, and held his mother's gaze, deathly calm. Shmi was staring up at her son, brown eyes watering, but held determinedly. There was still so much love in them, and it hurt Padmé to see the other woman aching so badly. This should have been a happy occasion, yet again, because of Vader's involvement, it was far more complicated than any of them knew.

Taking a deep breath, still unnaturally still, Vader spoke, his voice the strongest it had been since waking, and stern enough that his words would not be swept aside easily. "You wouldn't still love me," he replied evenly, "if you knew what I have become."

Padmé's heart clenched as she winced. Shmi, however, continued to stare at her son, shaking her head in denial. And after a very long, tense pause, Shmi asked very gently, as though to a child, "What happened to you, Anakin?"



## 41. Contradictory

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“What happened to you, Anakin?”

The question rang painfully in Vader’s ears as he stared down at the woman he believed had died so long ago. He still couldn’t believe it. There she was, in the flesh, alive and well after all that time. After years of self-torture, of hating himself, he found it had all been a lie. His mother was alive.

But he couldn’t let her get her hopes up. She was alive, still the same, warm, affection woman that dragged up long buried memories, but he was not the same boy she’d known. In fact, that little boy had died the day he’d believed he killed his mother. No, her son was dead, and he would not give her any illusions that that boy remained.

Guilt squeezed the Sith’s heart, however, as he stared into those heartbroken brown eyes. A part of him wanted to retract his words harsh, to throw himself into her arms again and beg her for forgiveness, but he knew he couldn’t. That was not who he was. His display earlier had been appalling, not fit for man, let alone for a Sith Lord. But he couldn’t help it. Everything had just burst and he’d been completely at the whim of his emotions, losing himself into the sorrow and regret he’d locked away for so many years.

Sidious had lied to him. It was not a surprise. His master lied to him about many things, kept so many secrets. But this was different. Just knowing that it had all been a lie, that the very foundation of his anger and hatred had been based off of nothing but a few misconstrued words... He was absolutely livid and he felt a swell of hatred blossom in his breast.

But it was not for Sidious alone. No, the majority of the hate was directed inward, towards himself. He should have known it was all a lie. He should have realized, questioned the information given to him. The moment his master had set him out upon the galaxy he should have investigated, should have come back, should have...

The anger flared, but oddly, dissipated quickly, mellowing into a sorrowful simmer. The lack of release frightened him, but he just couldn’t muster up the sort of fury needed to lash out with the Dark Side. He was still furious, but he was also very tired. And sad. He felt pathetic, but he had to admit that the raging swirls of guilt and grief were taking precedence over everything else for the time being. He’d never felt like this before. Not for a very, very long time.

Eventually, when it became apparent that he wasn’t going to reply, Padmé stepped forward, ever the diplomatic leader. “Why don’t we sit down?” she looked at the others in the room. She wasn’t smiling, but Vader could hear the gentleness of her tone. It was little wonder that she was so beloved by the people.

Agreeing in silence, the family all went and sat down at the table they had abandoned moments before. Shmi walked past him, her face still full of shock and grief. Vader couldn’t stand to look at it. It hurt. He didn’t even make a move to join them, but a soft hand on his

arm had the Sith flinching away from the touch. Looking over, Padmé was staring at him with the utter support and concern.

After all this time, after everything that he'd done to her, of what he'd threatened her with, she was still here, still beside him. A sudden sensation of wonder filled him at her goodness, but he crushed it habitually. He wasn't sure how to respond to it. He didn't deserve her support, yet he couldn't deny his longing for it. Again, frustration filled him as his emotions all seemed to contradict themselves.

Following her lead, Vader finally sat down where he had been earlier, and refused to make eye contact with anyone. With the way things were going, he wasn't sure what would happen if he did. Once more he wondered if he was going insane, this time due to how unstable his feelings were. Everything had changed and he didn't know how to handle it. The one thing he could always and had relied on was gone now, leaving him lightheaded and grasping for the wisps of Darkness that he could find, even as a part of him was sickened by the pathetic desperation. Another part said he didn't need it.

"I think," Padmé began, her tone soft but diplomatic, 'that a few things need to be straightened out.' The young woman looked around the table, her face slowly morphing into that of a Galactic Senator. Vader hated it. "My name is not Dormé, I am actually the Galactic Senator of Naboo, Padmé Amidala."

There were a few gasps from around the table, and honestly, Vader was just as surprised. He had believed it very wise that the senator had hidden their identities before, but with the revelation of his mother being alive, any sense of discretion had been completely obliterated. Shmi, as well as the rest of others, were confused and curious, and he knew they would be demanding answers. But Vader wasn't sure he wanted or could give them any.

"Everything else I told you was true," she went on, bringing the Sith from his dark thoughts. 'We really did crash out into the desert, but not from some sort of malfunction as I'd led you to believe.' She looked over at him, as though for support, but he could offer her none. "We... we'd been attacked while leaving Naboo," she admitted slowly. "Our escape pod somehow managed to come into orbit around Tatooine, when we crashed.

"As I said, everything else I've told you is true. We did walk into Mos Espa, and we were stranded there for three days until you helped us," she concluded, giving a more discrete glance at Vader, but he ignored it in favor of glaring at the table.

"And what about you?" Shmi leaned forward, staring at her son intently, and another surge of remorse and wretchedness washed over him. "What happened to you? How did you... How did you come to be here?"

There was a push from within his mind to tell, to open up and just confess everything, but there was also a strong desire to keep silent, to keep secret all of his deeds. He had not been lying before; his mother would not love him if she knew all he'd done, of what he'd become. Deep down he'd always known how disappointed, how disgusted Shmi Skywalker would be if she'd been around to witness her son's actions. She would have wept for the lives he'd taken, the terror and destruction he'd unleashed upon the galaxy. He'd wanted to become so powerful that no one could ever hurt him again, to become the absolute ruler of the galaxy to make her proud. Of course he'd been diluting himself in thinking that was the way to gain his

gentle mother's pride. He'd known, despite denying it, that it would actually kill her should she be there to see her son morph into the beast he had become.

No, he was too ashamed, too sick to come out and tell her everything. As a Sith Lord he should not have cared, should have boasted of his accomplishments, not be ashamed of them. Yet, it was just like a Sith to keep secrets, to fear the unexpected when there was no control to be gained. And he was afraid, terrified of what his mother would truly think of him. It had been so long, and he was so very different than the child she'd once known. But there was a nagging sense in the back of his mind, pushing him to speak, to admit to everything. There was a strange whisper in his mind, as if there was an actual voice there, telling him it would be all right, to free himself of the burdens he'd carried for so long.

But I can't, he thought desperately. How can I? I know what she'll think!

"Are you sure?"

I can't tell her! I can't!

"Because you are afraid?"

No!...Yes... I... I am, he admitted to himself, almost gasping as a knot in his chest suddenly came free at the admission. I am but I... I don't want to... hurt her.

Another knot came undone, and the crushing terror eased slightly. It did not leave, but Vader suddenly found it a little easier to breathe. "Life is often easier when you are willing to open up, even if it's just with yourself," the voice whispered reassuringly.

A little calmer, Vader finally looked up and into his mother's face. She was waiting patiently, her eyes searching as he knew she wanted to understand. And he wanted her to understand, understand that he couldn't tell her. There had always been reasons for Vader guarding his personal life as much as he had. Of course the Emperor had thought it would be beneficial to keep him in the mask and hide his face away, and release an unknown terror in the galaxy, but in part, so did Vader. He didn't want beings to know what he looked like. He didn't even want them to know if he were human or not. His desire to stay private had pleased his master as it only benefited their plans, but it had served Vader much better. By hiding himself away, by denying himself the truth of what he really was, Vader had discovered that it was easier to come to terms with all he had done, to make a fragile peace so that his mind was not always going back and forth between guilt and lust for power. After receiving his injuries from Dooku, he'd changed, matured, and he'd come to realize that lying to yourself was an excellent way to deny hidden feelings.

Vader had told Padmé not so very long ago that there were reasons he did not speak about himself or his life. The same applied here as well, if not more urgently. Again, a sick feeling rolled in his stomach at the thought of his mother learning all he had done. Yet that quiet voice whispered softly to him, though he couldn't understand the words. If he told... how could he look at himself again? He was barely hanging on to his sanity by a thread, could he stand having them all know everything?

"He was assigned as my guard," Padmé's voice broke the Sith from his tortured thoughts. He turned to look at her, and she glanced at him from the side. "He helped me when I was being attacked."

It was obvious she was leaving the revelation as to who and what he was up to him, and while it was a relief in part, it also made everything that much more complicated and stressful for the Sith. This was something she knew he would have to figure out and do himself, he knew from experience that she did not like getting involved in other people's personal life if she didn't have to, and while he was grateful, it didn't elevate the tension within him. In fact, he felt more pressured than before. The choice was his. Completely. He should have been glad, should have been angry had he not been at least given the consideration, but he wasn't. He was just... afraid.

"So you two didn't even really know each other before coming here?" the young man in the group asked.

Vader turned sharp eyes upon the other, needing a distraction. The other man was in his early thirties the Sith would guess, with light brown hair and blue eyes. His expression was stern, but the Force user could detect suspicion and fear in him. It pleased the Sith to an extent, if just because it was familiar. While so uncertain, it was comforting, in an almost shameful way, that he could draw confidence from others' fear. In fact, the strangers around him were all afraid, and had his mother not been sitting there, anxiety radiating off of her as well, he might have allowed himself to indulge in the pleasure of their fear. But because she was there, he couldn't.

Shmi, however, glanced at the young man with a frown, before turning back to Padmé. "But then how could you have..." she trailed off, her eyes going wide, and he could sense Padmé stiffening suddenly.

Something passed between the two, Shmi once again appearing shocked, and her face a little pale, but the senator regained her calm expression, even as the Sith sensed nervousness wafting from her as well. Turning to the others, she said simply, "We've known each other for about seven or so months, I think it's been. We've... had a rather... complicate relation."

"So you were a guard of some sort?" Shmi asked, searching her son's face.

Ignoring the change of subject, Vader looked down, feel guiltier at his mother's hopeful expression. Again, that voice in the back of his mind urged him to speak, urged him to share, but he just couldn't make himself do it. Unable to keep silent, however, when she was looking at him so urgently, he replied hesitantly. "Not exactly."

"Then what?" Shmi asked, desperation leaking into her tone now, giving way to her frustrations. "What happened to you? How did you and Padmé..." she paused, and again, the senator stiffened beside him. "...meet?"

Had he not been so worried, Vader might have been more curious as to his mother and Padmé's reactions. They were connected, and obviously the two women were keeping something to themselves. But as it was, he didn't press the issue. He had enough to think about without adding their secret to his list. So instead, filing the reaction away to be studied further later, he decided to throw himself fully into the now. He was the sort of man that did one thing at a time, saw one project done before taking on another. It was easier that way and made it harder to run from situations should they become more difficult. It was the same mentality he used when planning battles, and it was easier to think in such terms.

With the comforting voice in the back of his consciousness, and the more militaristic part of his mind coming into order, Vader realized, much to his chagrin, that he was essentially running away. Sith Lords relied on fear, it was an ally, but it was a double edged blade. They were prone to fear for themselves, just as much as they inflicted it upon others. Fear could hold them back, that's why most severed any connections they had and did not establish close ties. That's why they didn't form attachments, why they didn't fall in love. They cared about nothing except power and no one but themselves.

But Vader did care. He'd come to care about Padmé, and he'd always cared for his mother. Because he held fear for and of them, it was holding him back. He could either keep it contained within him, or... or he could release it.

Taking a deep breath, for the first time he could remember properly, Vader tried to center himself, releasing his anxiety and fear. Instead of harnessing what power they could give him in the Dark Side, he instead, without thinking too much about what he was doing, just let them go, ignoring the sudden rush of peace he felt at doing so. He didn't have time to dwell on that, and he didn't want to think about what it meant. So instead, he turned to his mother, and decided that he didn't want to run anymore. He was the Supreme Commander of the Imperial Navy and a Sith Lord. He shouldn't be running from anything.

"I was assigned to... look after Senator Amidala over half a year ago," he began slowly, easing his way into the explanation. He didn't like talking like this, especially with people he did not know in the room, but he tried to ignore the rest of the family, instead and focused solely on his mother.

"You are some sort of guard or...?" Shmi trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

Taking another deep breath, he replied bluntly. "No. I..."

His throat suddenly went dry. How could he tell her this? He knew what her reaction would be. He knew after the shock wore off she would shun him, that she would likely never wish to see him again, despite having just found each other after so many years. Once again, he would be leaving here with no connections after she severed them, and in truth, he wondered if that would not be better. She had every right to. But he needed to tell her. The tension within him crushing his chest in a vice-like grip. He had to do this, because she deserved to know.

"I am the Dark Lord of the Sith, Darth Vader," he declared, his voice bolder than he felt. 'I was assigned to watch Senator Amidala after accusations were brought forth that she was involved with the Rebel Alliance.' The gasps and sudden spikes of fear in the room were palpable, but he tried to ignore them, and continue, before he lost his nerve again. "It was my duty to flush out her compatriots and then kill her when she was of no further use to the Empire."

Chancing to glance up, he noticed the ashen faces of the family before him, his mother working her mouth, as though wanting to speak, but unable to. The fear he'd felt before redoubled into absolute dread and outright terror. Obviously the name of Darth Vader had reached out even to this desolate corner of the galaxy. The only thing keeping him from either flying into a fit or simply running out into the desert to die of shame was the small hand that was suddenly placed on his knee. He felt a wave of support and encouragement from Padmé, and he wondered at it, amazed that she was so loyal to him.

“Darth Vader?” the girl he did not know asked, her voice quite high in pitch.

“That’s not true,” his mother shook her head violently, still appearing thunderstruck. “That’s not true. Not you. Not my Anakin.”

Scowling more at himself than the denial, he replied shamefully, “It’s true.”

“But... It can’t be!” Shmi began crying again. The tightening in Vader’s chest only worsened. “Darth Vader is said to be a... a... They say that he’s... that people...”

The objects around the room began shaking as the Sith was slowly starting to lose control over himself and his powers. The shame and grief he felt at having to admit everything to his mother was becoming too much. A part of him believed that he shouldn’t have to hide who he was, there being a sick sense of satisfaction and pride in all that he’d accomplished. After all, he had come far in his life. When he’d left Tatooine, he’d been nothing but a sniveling slave, now he was the second most influential man in the galaxy. He stood to inherit the Empire, was the Supreme Commander of the Imperial Navy and controlled the Imperial Army. He’d come a long way from being just a slave.

But then, the lessons from so long ago, from his mother, echoed in the back of his mind. He knew without a doubt she was horrified, and that no matter how much he pleaded his case, she would not understand or approve. How could she understand? She had not left Tatooine since he’d left as far as he knew. She didn’t understand the complexities of the galaxy. But even the weak excuse couldn’t hold up to the fact that deep down, he knew what his shame and guilt mean. He knew what he’d done was wrong.

“Anything you heard about me,” he began quietly, not looking at anyone, “is probably true.” Once more, he could feel their terror acutely, but he held his ground, struggling, but knowing he had to continue.

“That’s impossible,” Shmi immediately denied again, trembling. “You... you wouldn’t do those things, not the things that I’ve heard! You... you couldn’t.”

“I’m not the boy you knew,” he snapped, his nerves finally frayed. The house shook in his frustrated anger. Again, the alarm spiked and it only served to frustrate him. He didn’t want their fear! ‘I told you, that boy died! He died shortly after the incident,’ he murmured. “I am Darth Vader,” he declared, meeting everyone’s eyes, hoping that by convincing them, it would convince himself as well.

Everything was silent, the farm family just staring in a morbid, horrified fascination. The fear that, in the past, he would have relished so completely, now left his stomach feeling sour, and the hole in his chest throbbed as guilt burned deeply inside of him. He couldn’t stand the contempt, disgust, and horror he felt from them. But he honestly expected nothing less. There was a certain liberty he felt in having finally confessed, but in many ways, it left him feeling worse than before, completely hallow.

Before he could do anything drastic either for better or worse, Padmé’s hand covered his from under the table, forcing him to look at her. “You may not be that little boy anymore,” she began quietly. “But you’re also not the Sith Lord I met all those months ago.”

Vader stared at the senator in shock before he covered it up, scowling darkly. He was in no mood for her riddles or mockery. “What do you mean?” he demanded.

Remaining calm, her face smooth, she went on. "The Darth Vader I was first introduced to all those months ago would not have bothered to fight so hard to protect me," she said simply. "The Darth Vader six months ago would not have healed my injuries, especially since they'd been so minor. He would not have left Naboo knowing that there were Jedi, allowing them to live in order to protect me. And he certainly wouldn't have let me argue with him in public and get away with it," she smirked slightly as he recalled their heated words on Naboo and at several other points in their twisted relationship.

"You might have been the Darth Lord of the Sith at one time," she went on, not taking her eyes from his, 'and maybe you still are, in part,' she stressed, "but you're not the same. I know. I know you better than anyone else," she declared. "And whether you knew it or not, I think I've seen glimpses of what remains of that little boy your mother once knew."

Vader sat stunned. Her words warmed him in a way he wasn't comfortable admitting, yet he wasn't entirely sure how to feel about them. He did not relish the idea of anyone 'knowing' him, even if it was Padmé, just as he wasn't sure what to think of her declaration. The idea that he'd softened, allowed her to see the remains of a person that didn't even exist troubled him.

But I do exist, the voice of old self whispered hauntingly. I told you, you didn't destroy me completely. I'm still here. I've never left. And she knew it.

He continued to stare at the senator, unsure how to feel, before he felt another hand on his. Pulling back sharply, he turned to see his mother watching him, her expression surprisingly filled with concern. It mystified him. But not as much as when she reached out for him again, and willingly touched his shoulder, despite having hesitated. How could she still be like this after all she knew?

"I know there is still good in you," she said earnestly. Vader's throat tightened and his heart clenched painfully. "Even if what you've said was true, I don't believe you're that... that monster. If you were, I can't see how you've inspired such... devotion from Padmé." Both he and the senator blinked.

"If you were really so evil, she wouldn't have taken such good care of you," Shmi said more firmly, her resolve set. "There is good in you still. I know."

The word 'good' had not been used in reference to him since he'd left Tatooine, he was sure of it. But even as there was a small part of him that felt warmed by the unwavering faith his mother still seemed to hold for him, Vader honestly didn't know what to think. He wasn't sure he liked it. She didn't know what she was talking about, she couldn't really mean what she said if she knew everything. This was not the reaction he had been anticipating.

"How can you say that?" he snapped, glaring at both his mother and the senator. 'I've killed thousands of being—women and children—for no other reasons than because I wanted to.' Shmi paled, while Padmé looked grim. "I've tortured people until they've died. I can kill a being with a thought if I wanted to. How can you say that I'm good?" he spat. "I'm a Sith Lord."

"True," the senator was the first to speak, as she stared at him challengingly. "But then, I've never known a Sith Lord to put the needs of others before himself. And I'm not just talking about me. I've seen you with your men. I know how much they adore you, the Storm

Troopers especially. You care about them, and you inspire care from them. Aren't Sith Lords only supposed to inspire terror? To maintain control and power?"

Vader stilled. She was right. She usually was. But that didn't stop the feelings surrounding the Sith as he looked between his lover and his mother. He just couldn't wrap his mind around the idea of their forgiveness. A part of him was angry with them. Why were they being so stupid, trusting him like this? He was not a man to be trusted. He had given them no reason to trust him, especially Padmé, but she was still defending him.

Turning to stare at the others in the room, Vader scowled. Their own emotions came to him through the Force, only upsetting him. They were showing the proper response to learning that the Emperor's Hand was in their presence, yet the two brunette women were contradicting that fear. He could deal with torture, could tolerate pain and accusations, yet he wasn't receiving any. It was somehow much worse. There was nothing familiar here, nothing to latch on to, nothing to make him feel as though he had the upper hand, or could gain it. He needed to regroup.

Taking a deep breath, he stood, startling everyone. It was a common reaction he often received, yet at the moment, it only served to upset him all the more. Staring down at everyone, seeing the different reactions he didn't fully understand, he felt like screaming. He felt like breaking things and destroying, but knew he couldn't. He wouldn't do that. This was, after all, his mother's home. He didn't want to cause her any problems.

So, feeling more lost than he had in many, many years, Vader turned and walked out of the room. He heard others getting up as well, following, but he didn't care. He found his way through the house, and walked outside. The suns were already climbing progressively higher into the sky, and he scowled at them. He needed time to sort all this out, to come to terms with what he was feeling. He was overwhelmed, a sensation that was not common for him.

Coming up to the ground floor, he walked a little distance from the house, out into the desert several meters, before he knelt down. The sand was already hot and coarse against his legs, but he ignored it. It was strangely familiar. He was not used to the softness of bed or the gentle touches of others. The only thing he had come to trust and expect was coarse, harsh treatment, and the sand was giving him just that. In a twisted sort of way, it was soothing.

So, crossing his legs, and allowing his arm to rest on his knee, while what was left of the other hung at his side, he closed his eyes and threw himself into the Force. Meditation had never been that easy for him, but he desperately needed it. He hadn't done it in over a week with everything going on and his emotions teetering precariously before landing on Tatooine. So, he sat in the sand, concentrating on the pulses of energy around him, allowing the quiet stillness of the desert soothe his agitation and the oppressive heat dull his mind.

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Across the galaxy, sitting down for meditation himself, Obi-Wan's eyes snapped open as he felt a gentle tremor in the Force. As he looked around, coming out of his daze, he saw the face of his master glowing before them. "Qui-Gon!" he breathed, eyes shining wide with hope.

The Force ghost smiled warmly down at his former padawan. "The Chosen One is waiting for you," he said simply, even as yet another ripple was sent out. This time, the Jedi Knight



could feel the essence of true Light come from the core. “Go to him, Obi-Wan. It is time you fulfilled your destiny.”

Smiling, the Jedi nodded. “Yes, Master. But how do I—”

“Follow your senses, Obi-Wan. Be mindful of all that I have taught you. The Chosen One is waiting to be instructed. But be patient and do not lose hope.”

“Yes, Master,” the Knight bowed, before standing up and making his way back to his ship. For the first time since coming from the Battle Over Naboo, he felt good. Better than good, because despite the pain of loss and the sting of moral betrayal, he could feel that something good was about to happen. There was no more crushing Darkness, and the ominous gray that had occurred after the battle was slowly, very slowly tilting towards the side of Light.

It was time to set things right, and Obi-Wan was determined to let no sacrifices be left in vain.

## 42. The Waiting Game

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Staring out at the figure kneeling in the sand, Padmé let out a long, slow breath that she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Beside her, Shmi was staring at her son as he sat out in the desert. Together the two women watched in silence. He looked... strangely lonely, kneeling out in the sands, like a misplaced shadow here on a world where you could not hide from the suns.

Shmi began walking out to her son, her face anxious, but Padmé grabbed her by the arm. The older woman turned and looked at her in confusion, but the senator merely shook her head. Tilting her head towards the door, she led Shmi back inside, back into the shade of the house. They walked past Owen, who had followed them out, and walked through the crowded hall where Cliegg and Beru stood. Nodding to them, she led the entire family back into the kitchen where she gently helped Shmi sit.

The moment the older woman was seated, Owen came to life. "We can't let him stay here."

"Owen," Beru chided lightly when her mother-in-law's stricken face turned up towards her step-son.

"Well we can't!" the young man went on, still looking a little pale. "If he really is who he said he was we can't just keep him here!"

"I can't send my own son away," Shmi frowned.

"But he can't stay here," Owen insisted. "If that's really Darth Vader... you've heard the stories!" he growled. "You've heard what he's capable of doing!"

The entirety of the Lars family appeared noticeably concerned, and Shmi seemed to lose a little more color than before. While staying with them, Padmé had come to know each Lars fairly well, and knew that Owen, despite his seeming thoughtlessness towards his step-mother and gruffness, was just concerned for her, and being realistic. In all honesty, the senator was surprised at how well the family had taken to learning that they were playing host to a Dark Lord of the Sith. It was a natural reaction to fear something so far shrouded in mystery and death.

Standing up, Padmé knew she had to defuse the situation if she could. "Please," she held up her hands calmly. "I know that this is all... shocking, but honestly, he won't hurt you."

Owen stared back outright incredulously, even while Cliegg and Beru looked skeptical. "I know that you may not think we're very sophisticated since you're from the Core and all," Owen crossed his arms, "but even we get news of the Empire here. We know all about Darth Vader and what he does to people. The only reason things here haven't changed much since before the Empire is because we all thought the Emperor and Vader wouldn't even bother to look out this far."

"I admit he can be very... dangerous," Padmé frowned back, "but he's not going to hurt you right now. He's just... confused. He needs time to adjust to everything that's happened to him lately."

"Did you not see the room shake?" Owen cried.

"He's confused," the senator insisted more firmly. "I know you don't understand, and you only have stories to go off of, but Vader... he's changing. I truly believe that. He's not the same man from the stories you all heard."

"I don't know," Cliegg spoke up for the first time, doubt very plain on his features. "There's something... off 'bout the boy."

"He's just trying to find himself," the senator raised her chin, becoming increasingly set in her resolve to prove them wrong.

"How can you defend him?" Owen scowled, concern for her sanity left unsaid but explicitly implied. "He even admitted that he was assigned to kill you."

"And he hasn't done it," Padmé snapped, her temper getting the better of her. "I said it before and I'll say it again, he saved my life. On more than one occasion. He's not the same man as in your stories. Not anymore. He's changed... is changing."

They were all silent a moment, each lost in thought. Looking back down the hall where they had come, Padmé found herself unconsciously thinking about the Sith just outside. Would he be all right out there by himself? He had just woken up from several days of fever after being in a pod crash, after all. Was he truly all right to be up and about like this? Would the heat hurt him?

When he had seen his mother... there were no proper words to describe how broken, how utterly shattered he'd been. Out of everything she had learned, everything that she'd thought she'd never see, witnessing Darth Vader break down into tears was the absolute last thing in this galaxy or the next that she thought would ever happen. It hadn't seemed like it was possible. He had looked so lost, so guilty and so full of shame. His utter devastation throughout the whole emotional storm had hurt Padmé's heart.

But it had also given her hope. Sith Lords did not feel remorse, did not feel shame or guilt. They did not break down into tears and fall upon their knees when reunited with long lost mothers. They did not try so hard to be hated, they did not check their anger. They would not allow others to see their fears. The Vader that she had first met would have killed them all rather than allow them to remain living after witnessing such a deeply emotional display. He would have made sure that no one knew of his lapse. He certainly would not have all but run out of the room to meditate over the problem rather than show his displeasure in a whirlwind of fury.

When she had first gotten a glimpse of his eyes a week ago, while in the battle, they had been burning red-gold, fiery and fierce. Sith eyes. When he had woken up the first time, they had been a sickly purple-yellow. The next time she'd seem them, they were dark, stormy blue, and now... now they were the eyes from Shmi's story. Pale, bright blue. The color of a clear, crisp morning.

Since arriving on Tatooine, it was as though the blackness that had made up the Sith had been slowly bleeding out of him, and the story was told through his eyes. Like many other things, the desert heat and suns of Tatooine had bleached the Sith Lord, had begun to burn away the blackness, exposing everything about him, eroding away his past so that it stood bare before them, until there was nothing left but his core foundation. And what Padmé found to be the center structure of what made up Darth Vader was what remained of a small slave boy, with bright eyes. She could see it, there was just a little bit more to burn away...

"I just don't think he can stay here," Owen's sigh brought Padmé out of her thoughts. The young man turned sympathetic eyes towards his step-mother. "I just—what if it's not safe?"

"I can't lose him again, Owen," Shmi's voice was very soft, very quiet, but firm. "I thought he was dead once. I suffered for sixteen years without him. I'm not going to lose him again. I can't... not even after all he's done."

"But they say he's killed entire worlds," Beru whispered her eyes wide with fear. "What if he gets angry and kills us?"

"He won't do that," Padmé had to keep herself from snapping at the other woman. It wasn't their fault. It really wasn't. Had they been completely calm with the situation, Padmé would have actually questioned their sanity. Turning towards Shmi, she knelt down before the older woman again. "I know this may sound crazy to you, to all of you, but I know he's changing for the better. A few months ago he wouldn't have acted like this. He won't hurt you. I know he cares about you," her voice was steady and confident as she looked into Shmi's eyes.

"But are you sure?" Owen stressed. "Are you willing to risk your life, and our lives, on this? The way he acted... he's completely unstable. You heard what he said! He can kill us with a thought. He's tortured people to death. And he has strange powers."

"And now it's our responsibility to help him finish what he's begun." Everyone froze to look at the senator, but she remained poised as she eyed them each carefully. Gone was the woman they had all gotten to know, and in her place was truly one worthy of their seat on the Galactic Senate. 'I understand your hesitancy in welcoming him here,' she nodded to Owen, "but now is not the time to be timid. You all have a very special, unique opportunity before you. You've been presented with an opportunity to change the very Empire!"

The Lars family frowned almost at one. "What are you talking about?" Owen asked slowly.

"Perhaps you had forgotten, but Darth Vader happens to be first in line to the Imperial Throne once Emperor Palpatine dies." There were blank stares around the room as the information settled in. They had indeed forgotten that piece of fact. It was not hard, actually, since Vader was more notably remembered for roaming and terrorizing the galaxy rather than sitting around Coruscant in the palace that he stood to inherit. "What you do now will shape him in the future, whether it is great or small. Why not use this time to our advantage?"

Looking up with bright eyes, Shmi stared at the senator with nothing short of hope burning deeply within those dark orbs. "What do you mean?"

Smiling gently, Padmé explained, "Vader is in a very delicate state right now. You haven't had the chance to see the great leaps and bounds he's made since being introduced to him

when I had, but he is changing. Today I saw the most significant change in him yet:

“He feels guilty,” she scanned the room for reactions. “I know it’s probably difficult to see, but I know he is, he just covers up his emotions with anger. But he is changing, though he’s confused. Now is the time to help him make the right decision. This is your opportunity, no, you’re duty to help him leave behind his past, to leave behind the evil. He’s lost and confused, but now’s our chance to help him latch on to something good.”

“But what will that do?” Beru frowned, still looking unsure. “Being nice to him won’t change anything.”

“You’d be surprised,” Padmé almost smirked at the other woman. ‘As I’ve said, he stands to inherit the Imperial Throne. What we do now may very well affect the entire future of the Empire. If we can somehow help him leave behind the darkness he’s allowed himself to be consumed by, and to grasp ahold of the light, of the goodness I know he was originally brought up to believe in,’ she smiled at Shmi, “then we’ve already taken the steps to ensure a better galaxy. If we can help instill in him all the virtues that were lost, when he ascends the throne, he will already be a far greater, and benevolent emperor than Palpatine could ever hope to be. He may even break the Sith line and become Emperor Anakin instead of Vader!”

The thought was a bit ridiculous, the old name of her lover that she had recently learned still sounding foreign to ears, Padmé couldn’t stop herself from hoping. She hadn’t realized it until she’d begun speaking, but this was their chance. This was her chance. If she could really help Vader navigate his emotional turmoil, help him see through the lies of the Emperor, reach the little boy that Shmi had loved so well, there would truly be a new hope for the Empire. With Darth Vader on the side of Light, there was really no stopping those who wished to overthrow the Empire.

Of course Vader turning from evil wouldn’t solve everything instantly. Padmé was not so naïve as to believe that. But certainly, it would help out quite a bit. The biggest threat of the Empire, at least most rebels would agree, was Darth Vader. The young Sith stood in the way of any progress that they might have gained from the very beginning. If they thought they had the upper hand, Vader was always right there to crush them. But if the infamous naval commander were to switch sides...

The possibilities were endless, and even though Padmé knew she could not truly count on Vader for any set reaction—having always proven quite unpredictable—the odds in her favor were too great to ignore. While his true relationship with the Emperor was yet unknown, the senator was willing to bet that the younger Sith was not fond of his master. And if they were able to turn Vader’s favor away, were able to break him of his unusual loyalty, then perhaps, just maybe, everything would turn out all right in the end.

Without realizing it, while lost in her musings, Padmé’s hand had gone down to her stomach on its own accord. When she noticed, she immediately let it fall back to her side. She scanned the room, but didn’t think the action had been noticed by anyone, until she caught Shmi staring at her. Or more accurate, her stomach.

“I... I don’t know,” Cliegg sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “This isn’t exactly what I’d expected when we took you both in.”

Smiling patiently, Padmé nodded. “I know. And I’m sorry. In all honesty, I thought that when we left, none of you would have ever had to have known the truth. I’m sorry I hide it, but I really did think it was necessary. To avoid... this sort of situation.”

“I’m glad it turned out this way,” Shmi’s voice was once again firm, despite still appearing a bit shocked. “I know my son is alive. That’s more than I could have hoped for. While I’m not... proud of what he’s done since leaving here, I... I want to understand him, but...”

As sympathetic as she was to Vader, the senator found herself more so with his mother. This was perhaps more of a traumatic experience for Shmi than it was for Vader. While Padmé did not pretend to understand the Sith completely, he had at least woken up to finding his mother alive. While shocking, to say the least, at least his discovery was a happy one— or it would if he let it be. Shmi, on the other hand, not only had the surprise of finding her son alive, but also had the rather devastating discovery of finding out that the boy she had loved for all these years had grown into the galaxy’s leading terror. Vader had a lot to deal with emotionally, mentally as he struggled to come away from the Dark Side, but his mother also had her own inner struggles with what to believe about her only child.

Kneeling down before the older woman again, Padmé smiled carefully. “He cares about you,” she said gently. “I know he does.”

Tears spilled from Shmi’s eyes as she stared into the senator’s. “How?” she pleaded.

Thankfully, Cliegg realized that this was a conversation that was best conducted privately. While it was clear Owen wanted to protest, probably not trusting leaving his step-mother alone with a Sith supporter, luckily a stern look from his father and a pleading one from his wife was enough to stop the young man’s rant and had him following after them. Once they were out of the room, the senator stood and took a seat beside the distressed mother.

“Even though he never spoke of you, I know he held you very close to his heart,” Padmé went on once she was certain that no one else was in the room. “When I first came here and I learned your name, I knew I’d heard of it before, but couldn’t place it.”

“Anakin... he...? But you said he didn’t speak of me,” Shmi frowned, wiping at her eyes.

Smiling compassionately, the younger woman elaborated. “I once went into his room trying to find something... human about him, I suppose,” she admitted. “His room was very... stark,” she frowned at the memory. “There was nothing personal in it at all. There wasn’t even a bed. But when I went to his computer consol, I found a little stone carving. I only realize now that the design looks like the designs native here on Tatooine. And on the back, written almost too small to read, was your name.”

“I’d been so frustrated at the time, believing that there was really nothing to him, that he was just as cold as a machine,” she shook her head, once more amazed by how dense she’d been, ‘but I didn’t realize that with that one little stone, he’d shown more care and humanity than I knew at the time. Don’t you see?’ Padmé smiled gently. “You were his humanity. You were what kept what little of Anakin that remained alive, even when I’d thought there was no hope.”

Shmi stared at her completely still, her face unreadable. The senator wasn’t sure if that was good or bad, but she was willing to bet that her words had affected the older woman greatly. While it was usually not Padmé’s way to push and manipulate people, especially with such

personal circumstances at stake, she was also practical enough to see the very great need in doing so now. After all, this was her chance, the galaxy's chance. If she could just keep pushing Vader towards goodness, towards the Light, she just knew that things would end up well for everyone.

"Please don't give up hope on him, Shmi," she said gently, causing the other woman to look up again. "I know what he looks like, what he may seem to be, but there's so much more to him than even I know completely."

At last, the solemn mask that had settled over the farm wife's face unnaturally was broken, and a soft smile appeared on her face. It was not carefree exactly, there was still wariness and worry, but it was happy, and it gladdened the senator's heart. "I haven't lost hope in him," Shmi murmured. "I'm just... sad how much he's lost his way."

"We can help him back," Padmé declared fervently. "I know that if we just help him to see... I know things will turn out right."

That warm smile only became more tender as Shmi looked over Padmé's. With a motherly hand, she swept a stray lock out of the senator's eyes, keeping her hand on the younger woman's face. "I am so very grateful that he has someone in his life like you, Padmé," she said sincerely.

The quiet words, though simple, unexpectedly had a great effect on the younger woman. While Padmé knew her own mother would be proud of her if she knew what was happening, it meant so much more coming from Shmi. This was Shmi's son, after all, and for the woman that she had come to respect so much was pleased with her like this, moved her. More than anyone would probably know. It just meant so much.

"I-I'm glad too," at last she responded, with tears in her eyes. Damn hormones, she thought ruefully.

As if reading her thoughts, Shmi reached out very carefully, and lightly placed her hand on Padmé's still flat stomach. The older woman's eyes glowed happily as she looked back up at the younger woman. "Is it... really Anakin's?"

Padmé couldn't help but beam as she nodded. If there was truly any good coming from this, it was that at least her children would have a very doting and loving grandmother on their father's side. "Yes."

"But how did you... I mean, I don't want to be noisy, but with everything that I've learned, how did you and he... get into a relationship?"

Memories of audaciously walking into Vader's conference room and proposing the proposition to sleep together sprang up in the senator's mind for the first time in a long time. The shame of it heated her face. Even with everything that had happened between them, she knew that what she'd done was not only completely stupid and dangerous, but it was also morally wrong. She'd essentially sold herself, and despite having the best intentions at heart, it was still wrong, and she knew it.

Fate must have truly loved Padmé Amidala to not only help her in her achieving a dynamic career, but it had seen her through wars and becoming lover of the more infamous man in the galaxy. Or perhaps she was just lucky, very lucky, that there really was still a soul in the shell

of Darth Vader that she had been able to reach out to and grasp. The odds of what was and what had happened were astronomically slim, and she didn't need a droid to check her math. She knew it. Thankfully, however, the Force was merciful enough to bestow good fortune upon her.

"Well..." she began, thinking back. 'We both knew the other was the enemy from the start, there's really no sugarcoating that,' Padmé admitted. "I knew he had orders to watch me and would probably eventually kill me, and he knew that I was a rebel. As time went on, though, I started to get a... little less afraid of him, and began to suspect that there must be something more to him than he let on. And... well... I made the first move to see if he would take the bait, and he did. From then on, it's just been... history."

"An experiment?" Shmi frowned.

"Sort of. At first," Padmé was quick to reply, not wanting the older woman to think ill of either her son or her. 'I think we were both experiment on each other,' she admitted. "Despite the overarching motives we may have had, I really just wanted to see something in him, and I think he wanted to show it. And as time went on, I... came to care about him. Deeply. And I know he cared about me too. He just doesn't know how to say or show it all the time."

The farmer nodded slowly, her eyes taking on a faraway look. "I think I understand... But you're still hesitant to tell him?"

Padmé sobered from her warm feelings quickly. "Yes. I... would prefer to wait. I know I said that I trust him, and I do, it's just... It's just I don't want to give him anything else to worry about. Or to dwell on. One step at a time. Should anything go wrong..."

Thankfully, Shmi seemed to understand completely. "I won't say anything," she promised much to the younger woman's relief. "Only you will know when the time is right. But..."

"Yes?" Padmé prompted with a small smile.

"But when all of this is done," Shmi began again, "and we have Anakin back, do you think that you could come visit me again? I'd like to know my grandchild."

Padmé's heart melted. "Of course!" she cried. "I'd already decided I was coming back to visit you before we found out. Of course I wouldn't keep you out of its life!"

"Thank you," the older woman smiled warmly. "You know, I am truly blessed. Despite all that's happened in his life, my son is alive, and I now know the truth. He's alive, and not only do I have him again, I know he has a good woman who loves him, and a grandchild on the way."

Love. The word sent a small tingle down the senator's spine. She did love Vader, she'd admitted that, but to hear someone say it out loud, to know... it made the feeling all that more real. It wasn't just a word she could throw around in her mind easily anymore. It now had more weight, and it frightened just as much as it excited Padmé.

"I-I do love him," she confessed quietly. "And I promise, when the time is right, and all this is over, I hope to make him happy, and give him the life he deserves."

Shmi took her hand, squeezing it gently in her tougher ones. "Thank you, Padmé. I am truly thankful."



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It was not a surprise to General Grievous that the Storm Troopers that had been assigned to him did not trust him. In fact, he had anticipated as much. The only thing keeping them from killing him, and he them, was the mutual orders from Emperor Sidious himself. Storm Troopers— like droids— did not question orders, but had the added quality of being uncommonly loyal. They would not kill him because they were ordered not to. He would not kill them because he needed them. It was as simple as that, yet the mistrust between them was still quite great, and it put both parties on edge.

Lying in wait, Grievous awaited his target with the practiced patience of a skilled hunter. As he waited, he could not help but reflect on all that had happened in his life. Fate had been cruel to him, he had discovered, never ceasing in its punishment. He must have done something truly heinous in another life to end up where he was now, but he tried not to think about that too much. It was hard to remember how content he'd once been with his life, only to have it all destroyed, his entire life turned upside down into a chaotic mess and having no control as he descended into the bowels of hell that eagerly swallowed him whole.

That's where Sidious had found him, and from there, things had only gotten worse for him. While it is a benefit to have been trained in the Jedi Arts, he was not a Jedi himself. He held none of their energy nor could he ever. He'd undergone many excruciating experiments to prove that. But from there he suddenly found himself the Supreme Commander of the Droid Army of the Confederacy of Independent Systems, fighting a war he did not believe in and that made little sense to him.

It was a chaotic mess, one that he had thrived in, but could ultimately not keep hold of. After losing the war, for his failure, he had been told to await Sidious's apprentice to give final orders, but unlike the Viceroy, Grievous had known better, had known that his time was swiftly coming to an end. Unlike his superiors, he had run. Perhaps it seemed cowardly to some, but he was smart enough to see the trap, and knew that if he could retrench, he would have a chance.

And it was as he ran that Sidious had found him. The Sith Lord had obviously known what his errant servant had been attempting. But instead of being executed, instead of receiving his due, a warrior's death, Grievous been imprisoned. For nearly four years he had been imprisoned deep within the bowels of the Imperial Palace. For three long years he was kept alive, forced to rot, forgotten.

What remained of the cyborg's blood boiled as he thought of the hellish time he spent in prison. After all he had done to serve his master, after all of his loyalty, he had been treated so poorly. They would not even kill him. It was the deepest insult that the former Kaleesh could think of. His life had been destroyed, and he had thrown himself into Sidious's tutelage, had sworn loyalty and upheld it fervently, only to be betrayed in the end. Everything had been taken from him once, and what little he had managed to obtain was again stolen.

It had taken his entire life, many years of agonizing misery, but since coming out of his recent imprisonment, the cyborg had come to a great realization: It didn't matter what he had in this life or the next, it didn't matter who controlled him or what forces acted against him. In the end, he would lose everything. Everyone would lose everything. All that he had, all that he had ever had, that was truly real and could not be taken from him, was the hunt.

His sharp hearing caught the slight sound of footfalls in the hall. Grievous instantly snapped his head in that direction, watching with insect-like fortitude as his quarry came ever closer. With each footfall he came closer, yet Grievous waited. It was the hunt that the former Kaleesh had left, all that made him feel alive, and he had mastered it long ago. He knew the proper time to strike.

And when his prey was directly beneath him, Grievous ignited his lightsabers and fell onto the unsuspecting victim. It only took seconds, and in a blink of an eye, his quarry was dead. Steadily, he replaced his 'sabers on his belt and began the task of dragging the corpse away. For a few short seconds, he had felt alive, he had felt free, but it was over, and once more the cyborg was little more than a droid. He was completely empty inside.

But it mattered very little to him now. He had decided that it didn't matter what he resembled, either physically or mentally, in this life. He would live for the hunt and the hunt alone, his only taste of freedom, of life.

As he arranged the body beside the others, a part of him thrilled at knowing how many he'd killed, while another sneered at how little struggle they had proven. They were not worthy prey, but his master had ordered death, and he was only too willing to bring it.

And so with his task complete here, he headed back to his ship, back to the Storm Troopers that watched him warily. Back to waiting in dread until the next hunt would begin, waiting until he would be able to feel again. But he would do it. Because in the end, the hunt was always worth it.

And in the morning, when Queen Breha Organa would wake in the late morning, she would be annoyed that her servant had not come to wake her earlier. When she would call out, her maidens would not come. Confused, she would be forced to go into the hall, calling out for someone to attend her. No one would answer.

Wandering the halls, she would not see anyone. And when she would come upon the brown-burgundy trail of dried blood, with the utmost horror, she would cry out, but still no one would come. And with absolute dread, she would follow the trail, until it led to her husband's study.

With shaking hands, she would open the door, only to scream as she saw the small mountain of corpses inside, her servants and guards. On the far wall, smeared with what could have only been blood, was left a message, one that would leave the queen sobbing in fitful hysterics.

Rebel Coward. You hide, but I will Find you. Or Kill all you love.

And while Breha Organa would run from the room, run throughout the palace in search of someone to help, she would only find that most of the inhabitation staying within the palace had been murdered in their beds. And as she would rush from the palace, screaming and sobbing, General Grievous would be streaking across the stars in his ship, preparing for the next hunt.

## 43. Changing

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The attack on the Palace on Alderaan went viral in the days to come. And while CT-585 was just a Storm Trooper, even he knew something was up. All clones were warned of possible volatile outbursts in the days following Lord Vader and Senator Amidala's funeral, but even the higher ups had not expected such a violent scene. Images of the Palace Massacre, as many were fond of dubbing the event, spread throughout the Empire, and with it, opened the floodgates of chaos.

Still on probation after his injury on Naboo, Cory was forced to serve as guard in the Military Base. It wouldn't have been so bad if he hadn't gotten a taste of some real action. Since coming into Lord Vader's services, the trooper had been granted freedoms and special responsibilities that had him moving about more freely than he had ever gotten the chance to before. He'd been assigned Senator Amidala's personal guard, the position that solidified once Lord Vader had realized the senator's attachment to her guard. And now that he never left the base, he no longer had special lunch dates, nor did he move about secretly in the night to aid the Sith in his plans to better the Empire.

In layman's term, he was bored. Dreadfully bored. He had been assigned to guard near Lieutenant Pilon's office, but that offered little to no relief from the mind numbing hours of standing in one place, occasionally barking at someone to move along. Sure, he'd done it before, he'd had worse positions, he was all but programmed to accept such duties without question or complaint, but recently... recently that wasn't enough.

He felt trapped. It was a feeling that had always plagued Trooper CT-585, but until recently, he had not been able to identify the feeling by name. Since his 'birth' he'd known what he was and what his duties were. He was not an individual in the sense others were, he was part of the whole. He did his job and he did it well. That was it.

Yet if that was all he was supposed to be, he found it rather cruel that the cloners created them with the ability to adapt. Sure, he understood the necessity of such a skill, so that they could change with the environment and situation to better their combat skills. But the gift of adaptation had a side effect that the Imperial Army, and indeed the cloners to an extent, had not counted on. It meant that the Storm Troopers could themselves change. Not physically, of course, but mentally. They could develop their own, unique personalities.

The populous had been assured that Storm Troopers were a single unit, that one was the same as the other. Perhaps in the beginning that was true, but Trooper CT-585 was not so sure now. He knew there were a million other faces that looked exactly like his, a million other voices that were the same as his, that his eyes were not unique, nor was his smile. But CT-585, despite knowing all of this, could not help but feel that he was... different.

With the ability to adapt, Storm Troopers eventually started to see themselves more as individuals, individuals with close ties that linked them to their brothers. And because of this, while fighting alongside with the Jedi against the Separatists, many clones had taken to giving themselves nicknames. It not only reflected their growing individuality, but it soothed the

ache that had slowly been forming in the whole at becoming more aware of themselves and what they were.

Every trooper knew that he was bred to die. That was just life. No one cared for them, they were expendable. Their sole purpose was to fight a fight for others, to die to protect others and for others being's rights. Storm Troopers themselves were not given any rights. They were not seen as 'real' beings. They could not vote, they could not hold property of any sort. They did not get a voice. Their purpose was to give such freedoms to those who did not fight for it themselves.

That, however, was simply a trooper's lot in life. Though many argued that troopers were not even 'alive.' They received no respect, held no real authority, and called nothing their own. Their payment was food and shelter. That was all that was deemed fit for their services, because Storm Troopers were little better than droids. They did not feel, they did not have dreams, and they certainly could not want for more.

But Cory did. And he knew other clones did too. While perhaps not as emotionally inclined as other beings, the clones still managed to develop feelings. It was hard not to when surrounded by other creatures and interacting with their superiors. They had feelings, and despite their programming to dissuade any thoughts of uprising, there was a growing sense of discontent among the clones.

Of course they could not do anything about it. They served the Empire and the Empire alone. It was at their very core. Yet while they loved their government and would never turn against it, it was hard for these developing creatures to understand why they were treated so badly. Had they not shown loyalty? Had they not shown their devotion? Why then, did their Emperor grant them so little? Why then were they treated as nothing?

It was becoming increasingly normal for troopers, at times, to question or backtalk their superiors. The nervous current of discontent was bubbling steadily hotter, and an outlet was needed. Tensions might have become a little too unbearable had not the introduction of Darth Vader been added into the mix. Despite what others said about the Sith Lord, Vader was the only creature in the galaxy that seemed to treat clones equal to other beings in the galaxy. It was not to say he favored them, though at times, it appeared so. But it was more that the Sith treated them as individuals, as real beings. When they messed up, he punished them the same as others. If they accomplished something extraordinary, he rewarded them. And what became known as a personal quirk, the Sith was known for walking around and talking to troopers instead of attending high society functions. He talked to them like they were real, not like droids.

And because of this, and the fact that the Sith actually fought in battle himself, it had endeared him to clones everywhere. Darth Vader was famous among the ranks. A hero, even. He was not like others. He was fair and honest. And in the end, that's all any of the troopers really wanted, though they could never say otherwise. They wanted to be seen as something more, even if it was just a little bit more.

Trooper CT-585 was no exception. Somewhere between his creation and now, he had formed true and very real opinions, likes and dislikes, and deeper feelings. CT-585 was known throughout the barracks for his rather odd sense of humor and his unusual knack for creating more eatable dishes out of the rations given. He had a nickname, too: Cory. He had

friends outside of the trooper circle, which was highly unusual. He was fiercely loyal, even above and beyond the programming of a clone, and he was one of the few that had broken any sort of regulation when he decided to drink on the job while with his friends.

The past several months had been the most expansive and simply enjoyable in Cory's life. He had made friends outside of the clone circles. He had a more rewarding and fulfilling job in Lord Vader's employment. And perhaps it started with his lunch dates with Senator Amidala, or perhaps being granted into Lord Vader's circle of personal confidence—him! Just a trooper!—or maybe it had been there long before but he'd never acknowledged it, but somewhere in the past few months, CT-585 had begun to ask himself the very poignant question: Is this all there is? Is this really all life could afford to give him?

Within the last few months, Trooper CT-585 began feeling unusual pangs of... something. He felt empty inside. When he saw other beings walking around, laughing, being with their families, it stirred something in the clone. It made him wonder, why couldn't he have that? Why was it that he was so very different from other people that he couldn't have something as simple as a family?

In truth, he was really not all that different from anyone, he reflected bitterly, but the galaxy didn't think so. He was nothing but an inferior being, something to be looked down upon and despised, yet always called upon to protect and defend those that shunned him. Somewhere between creation and now, he, like many other of his brothers, began asking the question: Is this fair? They fought and died for the galaxy, and despite what others thought, they could experience grief just as deep, just as real as anyone else. They lost their friends and brothers, yet no one seemed to care.

Except Senator Amidala. Except Lord Vader. That's why Cory had been so drawn to the Sith. Oddly enough, despite his antisocial reputation, Darth Vader could be extremely charismatic when he chose to be. Not that he needed to be to gain Cory's absolute loyalty. What the Sith had offered him in exchange for his loyalty and help, was so basic it was hardly a bribe. What Vader had offered him and his brothers was simply a chance. A chance to live in society, a chance to be granted the respect all clones deserved, to be acknowledged for all they had done. A chance to be human.

That chance, however, after having so much hope, had been viciously ripped from Cory's hands without him being able to stop it. He'd been so close, so close to not only helping himself, but all of his brothers. He stood upon the threshold of promise only to watch as the galaxy now crumbled beneath his feet.

It wasn't fair! It wasn't right. And now after all he had done, all he had invested, he now stood empty handed and lost.

But that was life. Storm Troopers were not unused to disappointment. They were not unused to the abuses of the world. That was their lot in life, after all, what they were bred for: to be used and abused and never fight back.

So after such a cruel disappointment and heartbreaking losses, Storm Troopers around the galaxy watched as Former Admiral DuMont attempted to fill Darth Vader's shoes. What they saw left much to be desired. In fact, the general consensus among the clones was that the new Supreme Commander would never be able to fill the void of Vader. He certainly could never hope to gain the respect that the Sith had.

And that point was only made clearer one night as Cory and his companion RS-1871, or Ross, were walking down to the lower levels to the locker rooms to shower and leave for the bunk house, when they were stopped by the Supreme Commander himself.

“Troopers!” DuMont shouted.

Both clones came to a stop instantly, spinning around, and coming to attention. “Sir!” they said in unison.

The other man was not impressed. “Why aren’t you wearing your helmets? What are you doing away from your station, troopers?”

Because of their breeding, neither Cory nor Ross reacted to the harsh tone, but simply stared forward, faces blank. “Sir,” Cory spoke up. “We are off duty, Sir. We have been for the past—”

“I don’t care for your excuses, trooper,” the Commander snapped. “Back to your posts.”

“Sir—”

Without much warning, Cory found his head snapping to the side, a painful sting burning his cheek. Slowly he turned his head back around, it having been struck by the crop the Supreme Commander had taken to carrying around with him. It was his form of corporal punishment, since he did not have the Force powers Vader had. Everyone around Base had heard or seen DuMont attempt to instill fear in the men, as the new Supreme Commander believed it was needed to maintain respect. But what DuMont did not realize was, despite rumors, Lord Vader did not go around abusing his officers and troopers at random. There was a system. If you failed, you were punished, if you angered him there were consequences, but one could still reason with the Sith. In an incidence such as this, the Sith would listen, perhaps make them find their replacements, but nothing more than that. It was more probable that Vader would simply leave without another word. He would not suddenly lash out unless he was already in what many called the ‘blood fever.’ But then, all personnel knew and recognized when that happened, and stayed clear.

There was a system and warnings with Vader. DuMont was random.

The shock on Cory’s face must have been evident, however, by DuMont’s sneer. Had he not been a clone, Cory might have touched his face where he was sure there was a large welt already forming. But as it was, he schooled his features back into a soldier’s blank, even as the Commander began screaming in his face about not talking back to his superior officer.

Unable to do anything else, the trooper was forced to listen and respond the obedient, “Yes, Sir!” around clenched teeth.

DuMont looked the pair over with disgust. “Well? Back to your posts!”

And without another word, the two troopers watched him storm away. Cory’s blood boiled, and for the first time he could remember, he had serious thoughts about lifting his rifle and shooting the pompous ass in the back. The thought was both shocking and strangely satisfying. He’d been mistreated like this before in the past, but it hadn’t bothered him much then. Now...

Things were changing. As he moved to pull his helmet back on, he caught Ross staring at him, the other trooper's expression grim, eyes burning. The two shared a look before almost in sync replacing their helmets and walking back to their station. A twelve hour shift was the norm for Storm Troopers, but it seemed now Cory and Ross had the honor of serving thirty-six hours. They were not human to the majority of the population, after all, so no one saw the harm or believed the possibility of overworking them. It was not abuse.

Things were changing, and despite Cory's inherent dislike of chaos and rebellion, he couldn't help but hope the chaos forming across the galaxy would come to Coruscant and take the Supreme Commander as a casualty. He knew he wouldn't be the only one to wish such an event either.

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Sitting up in bed, meditating, Yoda avidly listened to the Force as it whispered around him. Since waking from his injuries after the fight with Darth Vader, the little Master had been monitoring the changes in the Force that he felt. At first, there had been nothing but a hazy grey, and reports had swiftly come in confirming his suspicions: Darth Vader was dead. With the death of the Sith Lord, the Force had been strangely muted, as if suddenly equaling the field for others now that the suffocating darkness had been relieved. But only for several days. Now, the fog of uncertainty was clearing ever so slightly, and Light had gradually begun to seep into the mist. Not much, nothing astonishing, but it was growing, tentative, but steadily.

The Chosen One was indeed in the galaxy.

When Obi-Wan had first spoke about the possibility of there not only being a Chosen One, but also that the Force's Intended was indeed in the galaxy, Yoda was not above admitting that he had been skeptical. After nearly nine hundred years of life, never once had there been any hard evidence that a Chosen One would ever exist. There had been a few claims in his life, but of course, none could stand up to the tests, and in the end, the Chosen One had simply become a fantasy, a fable to be told throughout the generations, a myth for even the Jedi.

But now, with so many calamities in the galaxy, with so much devastation and chaos, the Chosen One had finally appeared. It made sense. The legendary Bringer of Balance had come now that the galaxy was in utter rumination. Now he had come into the galaxy, and at long last, order and Light would be restored.

Yoda looked down at his still healing body and couldn't help but think it was about time. Things, while they would not be easy, had at least been made more simple by the fact that Darth Vader had been killed in the battle, though, sadly, Senator Amidala lost her life as well. It was a shame, and Bail Organa had been absolutely devastated for days. In fact, the entire planet of Naboo had been devastated. The pangs of sorrow that had come to the green Master had been nearly overwhelming.

But the loss of life was to be expected when fighting, as was the chance of failure. His and Obi-Wan's mission had failed, but it was not to be without some hope since one Sith had been destroyed. Still... the loss of the senator had been hard. On everyone. And Yoda was sorry to see the young woman go. She had been one of the last bright sparks left in the galaxy under

the oppression of the Sith. It was a shame she was no longer in this life. They could have still used her.

Sighing, bringing himself out of his melancholy, Yoda decided that there was much he had to be thankful for. He had managed to stay alive in his fight with Vader, though badly injured, and he had been well taken care of by the Queen's handmaidens. Senator Amidala's maid, Dormé, had been particularly attentive, not only in treating injuries, but bringing news and reports to he and Bail, who had been forced into hiding soon after he'd come to Naboo after the battle. Together, the senator and Jedi Master stayed in the old underground caverns beneath the Palace of Theed, waiting.

Naboo, as well as the rest of the galaxy, was in an uproar due to not only the recent battle, but the deaths of both Senator Amidala and Lord Vader. As he healed and was able to settle himself after the trauma he'd experienced, Yoda could indeed sense not only sorrow across the galaxy, but an ever growing discontent and anger. It was simmering just under the surface, waiting to explode. Recent events had not been taken kindly by anyone, it would seem.

A suddenly spike of acute fear and agitation erupted, startling the little Master from his thoughts. For a moment, he feared discovery. Perhaps Imperials had found the caverns? Perhaps they were under attack again? But the distress was not planet-wide, nor even amongst a crowd. It was emanating from only one source: Bail.

Concerned, Yoda sat up farther, looking out of the door of his small room. He was not supposed to get out of bed, his injuries from not only a 'saber, but having been choked, thrown about like a rag doll, as well as catching some Sith lightning had rendered the Grand Master quite incapacitated for several days following. Now, however, despite having been told that he wasn't ready to leave his bed, the Jedi Master had thoughts of breaking his promise of remaining still in favor of investigating what was happening.

Moments later, Bail rushing past his door, face white, while being followed closely by Dormé. Yoda called out to them both, but it seemed neither had heard. Something was happening, and the green Jedi was going to find out.

Carefully standing up, he grabbed the makeshift cane the handmaidens were generous enough to provide for him, before he slowly hobbled out of his room and towards the senator's. Thankfully his legs had healed nicely, and quickly through not only the rather advanced medical equipment on Naboo, but also due to some Jedi healing trances he'd placed himself under. Vader had been quite thorough in his fight, nearly breaking all of the Grand Master's bones. But Yoda's race was not merely long lived, but quite sturdy and fast healing, and with the help of the handmaidens and Bail, he was nearly completely recovered.

But still not wishing to tempt fate, he shuffled carefully out into the hall until he came to stand outside of Senator Organa's room. Dormé was just inside, looking anxious as Bail packed his bags. "Are you sure I can't persuaded you to wait, just a little bit?" she was saying.

Bail turned and outright glared at the young woman, surprising Yoda greatly. They owed a lot to this young woman, and to treat her so boorishly went against the senator's own protocol. There must be something terrible wrong.

"You would have me abandon my wife, Miss?" he raised an obstinate eyebrow, before turning back to his packing.



"No," Dormé shook her head, her face grim. "But I would have you be smart. And right now, you can't leave. The exits to this place are being monitored at this time."

"I don't care!"

"Leaving are you?"

The two humans stopped short and turned to stare down at Yoda in surprise. "Master Jedi!" Dormé exclaimed. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"Trouble there is," he ignored her to stare at Bail. "Something is happening?"

The senator suddenly looked a little less sure of himself as he stared into the eyes of the Jedi, but he recovered himself rapidly, and seemed to redouble his stubbornness. "Yes," he nodded firmly. "There has been an attack at the palace on Alderaan. My wife was one of the only survivors. I must go to her."

"Hmm. Grave and troubling this news is. More to the story is there?"

"According to reports," the handmaiden knelt down beside the small Jedi, "everyone in the palace—servants, guards, guests—were all slaughtered through the night. The only clue that authorities have was a message that the attackers left: 'Rebel coward. You hide, but I will find you or kill all you love.'"

Bail seemed to have gone pale again when the message was repeated. The poor man looked devastatingly ill, almost as though he would become sick right in front of them, but he managed to lean against the wall, closing his eyes and shaking his head. "This is all my fault," he whispered. "They found out what I am and went after her. This all my fault and I wasn't even there to protect her!"

"The authorities on Alderaan believe that the attack was the result of the populous discontent with recent events, the deaths of Senator Amidala and Lord Vader," Dormé replied neutrally, but Yoda could still see the pain in her eyes. "Apparently there's been accusations across the galaxy about those who were suspected of being rebels, and for whatever reason, civilians have taken it upon themselves to seek retribution for the battle here. There have been numerous attacks, but this one was the bloodiest."

The Grand Master was slightly shocked to hear such news. A part of him had always known that an outright rebel attack would not be received well, as Rebel High Command had always hoped. That was why Bail had argued so much against the idea when it was proposed to them several days before the mission to recover Senator Amidala had taken place. Both Bail and Yoda had been against the plan, and had both been under the impression when the meeting had concluded that it would not take place, and that Rebel High Command had seen reason. The old Jedi had believed it was just such a wild idea that really had no merit that he hadn't bothered to tell Obi-Wan about it, knowing how the younger man tended to worry.

But while Yoda had believed that there would be serious repercussions of a battle, he had not thought that there would be so violent an outburst among the civilian population. "How many, at the palace?"

The handmaiden sighed. "They don't know. That's that strange part, I suppose," she chewed at her bottom lip. "Reports from the night watch said all was peaceful. They didn't

hear anything. And Queen Organa wasn't woken, nor were the few other occupants that remained alive..."

Yoda felt his blood run cold. He thought back to the message that had been left. "Know, they did, of your involvement, Bail. But retaliation from civilians this was not. A planned attack by the Emperor, this was."

The senator scowled. "I don't care what it was. Right now I need to go home! I need to see my wife and—"

"Waiting, they could be, for you," Yoda felt a small rise of panic, but gave it to the Force. "Spared your wife for a reason, they did. To flush you out, likely was their plan."

"Well it's working," the human grunted, turning back to packing. "I don't care what you say, what you do. I'm going. I can't leave Breha alone. She's innocent!"

"Your going to her, the opposite it will seem," the Jedi Master sighed. "Protect her you could, perhaps for a while, but your guilt onto her will go, the closer you are to her."

That caused the senator to pause. "What?"

"Alive for a reason, they kept your wife," Yoda stressed again. "Important she is. Stop, her importance may become, should you both be found together."

Bail began to tremble ever so slightly. "You... you want me to just abandon her?" his voice was suddenly thick, scratchy.

This was always the hardest part about being a Master, Yoda had found. He was old enough, wise enough to have seen such situations before, to understand the minds of others from simply seeing it all before. He could more clearly see weaves and webs of plots than others, and this one was classic. What was always hard was to try and make the younger beings understand the situation, to have them step back from their feelings and emotions, to look at it logically. Clearly. It was never easy, and never without pain, which always made it so difficult for Yoda to teach.

"If you care for her safety... then yes."

"Master!" Bail exclaimed in horror. "What if they kill her?!"

"Safer she is without you near," the Jedi replied truthfully. "Queen, she remains. To kill her, great discontent would fall upon the planet, the galaxy. Many reasons there were for the Emperor to leave her alive. Many reasons there are still. No sense, there would be, in your own people to attack their queen. Beloved, she is. No reason at all. The message left, indirect it was. As far as the general populous is concerned, could have been meant for anyone."

That quieted the senator as he pondered all he had been told. He still did not look well, Yoda noted, still too pale. His posture was that of a defeated man, though it still remained ridged and stiff. Bail was an honorable man, a good man. Yoda knew that he had been worried enough about his wife when he'd been forced into hiding, and with this report all of his worst fears were realized. This man had given up and risked so much for the hope of improving the galaxy, and now he stood close to losing everything.

"I have to go to her, Master," Bail said at last, his voice quiet. "At least just to see her. To give her a message."

Yoda sighed. “Bail—”

“I won’t stay,” the senator said quickly. “I won’t risk putting her in anymore danger than necessary. But... I need to see her, Master. Please. Don’t stop me.”

The old being suddenly felt all of his nearly nine hundred years. Despite having to be harsh at some points in his life with younger beings, the Grand Master truly possessed a soft heart. He was stern when he had to be, but was also understanding and quite gentle. That’s why he had always loved teaching the younglings their exercises. It had been a chance to set aside the severe Grand Master and to show more of his true self, the self that loved peace and to laugh and to teach.

So as he looked into the dark, sad eyes of Bail Organa, Yoda’s heart was torn. He did not want to cause this man anymore suffering, yet he knew it would be best to stay away from the queen. The thought of throwing around his authority came to mind, but then, Bail was not a Jedi and had no obligations owed to them. And the senator was certainly not without his own power.

Sighing, Yoda bowed his head. “Go if you must, but me, you will take as well,” he added as sternly as he could manage, still feeling unbelievably tired.

The senator’s smile was sudden and brilliant, as he nodded. Still in the room, Dormé turned and looked at the green Master, a determined glint in her eyes, one that Yoda knew all too well. “You’ll both need help,” she began slowly, carefully. ‘I offer you my services. I have been trained in basic combat as well as infiltration. And besides,’ she added before Yoda could have responded, “you’ll need someone to get you through the palace without getting caught.”

Knowing he was trapped, Yoda bowed his head in consent. “A choice, I believe, I never had.”

The young woman smirked. “No, not really.”

And so, the three planned and made preparations. Dormé went to the queen, telling her of their plans and to procure a space craft, before they were ready to leave. Within an hour of first discovering all that had happened, the trio had just been granted clearance to leave Naboo, the last of the blockade around the planet after the battle having finally eased. And soon, they were out shooting across the stars, away from Naboo and to Alderaan.

As they left, Yoda couldn’t help the nagging feeling that things would suddenly be happening very quickly. Things were changing, the Force was changing, and he had to wonder what would happen next. If the Chosen One was real and out there, Yoda prayed that they would appear soon, lest they all wake one morning to discover they had fallen into hell.

## 44. Chosen One

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Since his dramatic waking, Vader had scarcely said three words put together. After he had left the family sitting around the table to walk out into the desert, he'd stayed there well into the evening, not moving. Several times, Padmé or Shmi had gone out to give him water, but either he had ignored them or he was so deep in meditation he didn't hear. It was only after the night had fallen, and the family was thinking of going to bed for the evening, when the Sith Lord finally came in. He didn't say anything to anyone, just grabbed a glass of water, drank it down, and then left again. He barely even looked at any of them.

The next morning, he was nowhere in sight. For a horrifying moment, Padmé thought that perhaps he had left or had been taken by the Sand People the Lars' were always so worried about. But of course, Vader was still a Sith Lord. He could handle himself. And as everyone sat down for breakfast, he returned, his face grimy and smudged with sweat, but none the worse for wear. Without a word, he sat down with them, ate a little, before he was gone again. That night, he did not return inside before they all went to bed.

And so the following day, when they all woke, he was there, sitting at the table, staring outside. Padmé had dared ask him if he'd even slept, and was surprised when he answered with a simple, "No." He looked dirty, smelling a lot like oil. It was only later when Owen came in, the farmer exclaiming that their power converters had been fixed, that the senator realized what the Sith had been doing. Surprisingly it had been nothing harmful. He'd been fixing equipment, probably the day before as well.

He stayed around for breakfast again, and didn't leave when he was finished. Instead, he sat rather quietly as the rest of the family finished their meal. He listened patiently as Owen asked him how he fixed everything, and why. Vader gave no clear answers, just clip responses, while avoiding eye contact. Padmé supposed he would feel a little strange after everything they'd been through, to be spoken to as if he were nothing more than a simple man, and that was not adding to the fact that he now found a family. How odd, she thought, to suddenly have not only a mother, but a step-father and brother, and sister-in-law.

And while the Lars' men and Beru left to work, Shmi, Padmé, and Vader stayed at the table. Seeing her chance, Shmi talked to her son about all that had happened in her life, about how she had met Cliegg and about how she'd gotten married. There was no anger in Vader's face as he listened, and he did not interrupt. He appeared completely calm, if not a bit... heavy. It was as if the weight of the galaxy was upon his shoulders.

Although, the galaxy always had been on Vader's shoulders. He was the key instrument that kept the Empire together as he went from planet to planet, if necessary, to maintain order. The happenings across the galaxy were Vader's affairs, his problems, no matter how small. Perhaps, after keeping his posture so proud for so long, it was finally beginning to wear on him. Or perhaps it was something else. Darth Vader was guilty of many things, after all.

It was difficult to listen to Shmi trying to reach out to her son, while Vader seemed determinedly distant. At one point, Padmé began to feel intrusive and got up to go into the kitchen to make tea. She knew that Vader didn't like having her go far from him, or at least

liked to know where she was, and since he didn't seem to be in any emotional distress as he had the other morning, she thought it was best to leave he and his mother alone for a time. Maybe he would open up more to Shmi if he thought Padmé couldn't hear.

So, excusing herself to the kitchen, the others didn't seem to notice as she left. Once in the other room, Padmé sighed and leaned against the counter. Who knew that this would be so hard? Had this been anyone else turning their life around, they would have expressed... something by now. Instead, Vader still kept everything pretty well bottled up. It appeared to be a reflex of some kind, one that had been forcefully instilled in him. While Padmé understood, she really did, it was a source of great frustration— for more than just herself, she was sure. There had to be away to crack open the bottle to see inside.

When she peeked around the corner a few minutes later, while she didn't hear anything, she saw that Vader was at least speaking to his mother. That was an improvement. Getting Vader to communicate anything was always a challenge when he didn't want to speak. Another habit that the senator was hoping she could help him break. She was no doctor, but even she knew that it was not healthy for him to be so quiet. He needed to talk about things, even if it was just to one other being.

Eventually, however, Vader did get up to leave, but not before his mother grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze, smiling up at him. The Sith frowned, his expression almost guilty, before he turned and walked out of the house, probably going back to the workshop. When he was out of sight, Shmi sighed and leaned forward on the table, her head in her hands. The poor woman was trying so hard.

Steeling her resolve, Padmé decided that it was time to make Vader speak. They had all waited, had been patient for him to open up, but he wasn't budging. Now it was time to take matters into her own hands. So she silently slipped out, following the way the Sith had gone.

When out in the shop, she saw Vader already working on another project. Even with only one arm, his precision and dexterity was quite impressive. He definitely knew how to work with machines. Distantly, she remembered her first ride in a speeder with him, how he didn't have to look at the controls at all to be able to pilot. Now that she knew all the facts, the stories Shmi had told of her genius son didn't do Vader credit. It was a good bet that Shmi had downplayed most of what she had told others in an attempt not to boast. The fact remained, however, that Vader was really quite brilliant, and Padmé was sorry that she, like many others, didn't get to see it often in a positive light.

Leaning in the doorframe, the senator watched the tall man as he worked for a moment before venturing in a little further. "What are you doing?" she asked gently. Start off with the simple then ease into the heavy topics. That's what she'd learned when getting into politics.

Surprisingly, Vader answered relatively quickly. "The power cell burned out," he replied.

Padmé nodded, taking this as a sign that things would be easier for her than when she first began. She smiled over at him softly. "I see. It seems like a complicated project."

Hoping he would reply, the senator was forced to wait several long minutes, but she knew the game. Push a little, wait to see if anything was pushed back. If he didn't respond, it was her right to push harder. It was in all actuality a game of dominance, and she knew that eventually Vader would have to assert himself in her game.

Just as she began to suspect he wouldn't say anything, and she was quickly coming up with something else to say, he surprised her once again by speaking up. "Fixing machines is simple," his voice was so soft Padmé had to walk forward to hear him properly. "I'm good at fixing things."

"I've seen," she smiled encouragingly. She'd never thought she'd hear Lord Vader making small talk. It seemed stiff and difficult, almost awkward, but he was trying and she appreciated the effort. "Your mother said you always were."

That was apparently the wrong thing to say. The rather pleasant moment they had been having was suddenly broke when the Sith spun around and glared at her, blue eyes hard as ice. The unexpected hostility caught the senator off guard enough for her to gasp in surprise. The last few days she had been finding it difficult to believe that this young man had really been the Sith Lord that terrorized the galaxy. But as she stared at him now, seeing and sensing his anger, it wasn't so hard. Perhaps dispelling Darth Vader from Anakin was going to be harder than she had originally hoped it would be.

"Then why can't I fix this?" he snarled, his eyes narrowing, as if reading her thoughts.

Padmé was stunned. Despite holding the tools in his hand, she knew he wasn't talking about the power cells anymore. The sudden change of topics threw her almost as much as the initial glaring had, but she had not been voted as queen at the age of fourteen for nothing, and she quickly retreated and began plotting out a new strategy.

He was not playing around anymore, not avoiding the issue. After several days of silence, he was finally tired of it. But even knowing he was opening up about the issues that had occurred recently, Padmé wasn't sure which topic he was trying to bring up. It was difficult for him to speak about anything remotely personal as it was, but with everything that had happened, he was more strained and sensitive. So, making sure to keep her face and posture as unthreatening as possible, knowing that she dealing with a wounded animal of sorts, she made sure to remain composed. The slightest wrong move or tone of voice could set him off.

"I don't know," she began carefully. "What can't you fix?" she asked after he did not respond to her initial remark.

While his stance became less hostile, his features did not, and his face twisted into an ugly hatred, one that was directed completely inward. "All of this," he snapped, looking around the room and out the door, into the desert. "I should be able to fix this."

"You've been doing the best you can," she replied warily, still not fully understanding even as she chanced taking a step forward. Carefully placing a hand on his arm, she watched as he stiffened, but he did not jerk out of her touch this time. That was a good sign.

Vader turned and looked down at the small woman, eyeing her suspiciously. There was still a sense of deep loathing about him, but not of her. The confliction she saw in him before was still very much present. He was undergoing an identity crisis, one of such grand scales, Padmé wasn't sure she could honestly say she could relate to. While adjusting to the personality of a public figure from the normal girl she had been was not really the same thing as what Vader was now faced with. He didn't have to just face his past self, he was struggling with two very different beings, with good and evil. The usual hatred and anger she felt from

him when they'd first met was gone, or at least was extremely muted until it faded away so she could not detect it. Now all she could feel was self-loathing and confusion.

"I should be able to fix this," he muttered, looking back out into the desert.

"Maybe one day you can," Padmé cautiously began stroking his arm, wondering if he would get annoyed with her. "Right now, though, I think we both need to rest before doing anything."

"Rest," he muttered with distain, but still did not pull away from her.

"Everyone needs rest." She smiled slightly. "Even mighty Sith Lords."

Vader turned to stare down at her, an almost sad expression crossing his features before he swept it away. He did not reply to her tease. Once more, Padmé was left surprised and puzzled. But she was determined to figure this out. She was determined to help him.

"What's wrong?" she asked plainly. Perhaps it was time to start being more direct. Vader always appreciated candor.

Gently, Vader pulled out of her hold and walked to the other side of the workshop. There was little sound. The desert was silent, save the slightest hint of a breeze as it shifted sand. The silence was only broken by the quiet hum of machinery. It was almost peaceful, in a way. Perhaps that's why he came out here. Perhaps this felt the most familiar to him, felt like home...

"I'm not..." he trailed off, but his shoulder's stiffened and he began again. 'I'm not the Sith Lord I should be,' he confessed. "I... I feel..."

He turned back towards her, his face now betraying everything. There was fear, anger, confusion, helplessness, and many more things she couldn't quite decipher. It was the most open expression she'd ever seen on his face. Not even while sleeping had he shown so much. It was raw, passionate, and it broke the senator's heart. How much pain was this creature in? How much torment had he gone through?

Walking over to him quickly, while words failed her, Padmé did the only logical thing she could think to do. She hugged him. Without daring to look into his face, she simply put her arms around him, and gently squeezed him. She hadn't been this close to him in a long time, nor had they had any such intimate displays since he'd wrapped his arm around her in Mos Espa. But, oh, how good it felt to be this near him again. While rather broken, he was still strong and solid beneath her. She poured everything she could into the gesture, and hoped that he would understand that she was here for him.

It felt like forever, but not long enough, that they stood there like that, Padmé with her arms around Vader, and the Sith standing still. He had relaxed into the touch, but he did not reciprocate the action. And after what had probably been only a few minutes, the senator pulled back. Brown eyes stared up into icy blue, and the strange, twisted relationship that they had fallen into didn't seem quite so complicated as they looked, really looked, at one another.

"How can you be like this?" Vader's question was said softly, but it shattered the silence violently. "After everything I've done to you..."

Smiling self-depreciatingly, understanding the irony loving her hated enemy, Padmé answered truthfully, having in the past several days come to an understanding of herself and their relationship. “I don’t know,” she began slowly. “Maybe it’s because I saw traces of the little boy, of the man, that your mother raised hidden beneath the darkness.”

Vader scowled for a moment, but it disappeared quickly into silent acceptance. “You are a very foolish woman, Senator, to have trusted in a boy long believed dead.”

Overjoyed at the small admittance that Anakin did in fact exist, Padmé smirked up at him, giving a challenging look. “No more foolish than an alleged Sith Lord who would risk his own life for such a senator.”

And that’s when it happened. The galaxy stopped moving, and Padmé’s heart skipped a beat. For the first time since really seeing him, perhaps for the first time in many years, Darth Vader smiled.

It was not bright or joyful. No, instead, it was a small, a barely noticeable lifting of the corners of his lips, but she saw. It was not joyful in the conventional sense, but it was content, warm. Those hard, icy eyes melted ever so slightly, as he looked down at her in obvious affection. It was one of the most tender expressions Padmé had ever seen, and it was coming from Darth Vader.

As she stood speechless, staring at him stupidly, the Sith leaned down slowly, and carefully took her lips with his. They were a little chapped from the heat, but they were warm. A pleasant tingle ran through her body, reminding her very prominently that she was a woman. And he was a man.

But before she could get caught up in the moment, he pulled away from her, their kiss ending as only a sweet caress of lips. As her eyes slowly fluttered opened, she found Vader staring down at her. He was no longer smiling, but a light frown had come across his lips. He looked... bewildered, as though he were trying to figure something out. Padmé desperately wanted to tell him to forget it, to bring him down for another kiss, only to remember that they were limited in their actions. For more than one reason.

As those frosty eyes regarded her, scrutinizing her from head to toe, Padmé remembered one very important detail that she was still unwilling to admit. Stepped out of his arms, the senator tried to smile coyly, hoping he hadn’t caught on to her panic or sensed the life growing inside her. There would be a time and a place for that, but not quite yet. Neither were ready for such a revelation.

“Foolish man,” she smirked, hoping to throw him off with more teasing.

The frown remained, but he did not seem tense or angry, merely thoughtful. “Perhaps,” his voice was quiet as he drawled out the word.

Turning away abruptly, Vader went back to his work. The sudden dismissal stung, but then again, Padmé had been the one to pull away first. “Do you want to come back in?” she asked carefully. “I know your mother would like to talk to you.”

There was a troubled expression on the Sith’s face, but he did not answer right away. “No,” he replied. “I’ll finish this.”



And they were back to clipped answers again. The senator almost sighed, but restrained herself. This was partly her fault. She shouldn't have panicked like that. But then, there was such a disturbed expression on his face now that she couldn't help but wonder what he had sensed. Did he know?

The thought was disturbing, and she almost asked him, but wasn't sure she could handle listening to him reveal that he knew. Again, many horrible scenarios ran through her mind. How would he react if he knew? Would he be angry? Would he want her to get rid of it?

Not willing to talk about this just yet, Padmé left him to his work and wandered back into the main house. An hour or so passed and Vader did not return. Padmé was helping Shmi with laundry when they heard a rather peculiar knocking sound. The two women looked at one another, before Shmi excused herself to go to the door. Padmé trailed behind slowly in case something was wrong.

The older woman answered politely. "Can I help you?"

"Hello there," a rather bright voice replied, sounding wonderfully familiar with its elegant Coruscant accent. "I'm wondering if you could help me. You see, I'm looking for someone."

Rushing forward, Padmé gawked as she stared at the man in the door. "Obi-Wan?"

Grey eyes snapped instantly over to the source of his name, and the usually calm Jedi Knight appeared completely stunned as he stared at her, slack-jawed. "Padmé?!" he gasped.

Without a thought, the two rushed towards one another, and before the senator knew what was happening, she was in the Jedi's arms, and he was squeezing the life out of her. "Senator!" he cried. "How is this possible? I'd thought—I mean, I saw you—and the galaxy thought—and the funeral—and... and I'm babbling like an idiot," he gave an uneasy chuckle as he released her.

Unable to stop herself from smiling at the uncharacteristic display of enthusiasm from the man before her, Padmé also gave a slight giggle. "It's good to see you, my friend. But what are you doing here? And what about a funeral?" she frowned as her brain caught up to her.

The Jedi's eyes lit up in a way that the senator had never seen before. Those stormy eyes burned brightly with hope and determination. "I'm here because I'm searching for the Chosen One," he beamed. "I've felt his—or her—tremor in the Force."

"Chosen One?" Padmé frowned.

Obi-Wan nodded eagerly. "Yes. I traced the feeling here and... and..." he frowned, slowly become more like himself again. "Senator, if you're alive, what about—?"

"Me?"

Everyone jumped at the foreboding growl and the snap-hiss of a lightsaber. The blade suddenly came to rest at Obi-Wan's neck, the crimson light cutting a line between the Jedi and the senator.

Turning around, three pairs of eyes saw Vader standing just behind Padmé, having somehow snuck up on all of them, a malicious scowl on his face as he glared at the Knight. The senator looked between the two Force users, watching as Obi-Wan's startled expression

slowly morphed into one of uncertainty. Of all the luck, just when Vader had started to open up, to let go of his past self, a Jedi had to come into the picture again!

“Kenobi,” the Sith growled. “It seems that destiny has thrown us together yet again.”

“Again?” the word slipped out of the older man as an unconscious reaction. Padmé could see Obi-Wan’s mind working furiously as he tried to understand his situation. But she knew he knew what this was all about, though studiously denying it to himself.

Vader only sneered. “You know, you’re the only Jedi I’ve ever had the displeasure of facing more than once.”

Realization was like a physical blow to the Jedi, as his face twisted in pain, as if being stabbed by lightsaber poised at his neck. That confidence that the senator had seen from the other man evaporated like water in the desert as he stared into the naked face of Darth Vader. “You?” the Jedi’s voice came out almost like a croak. “You’re him? You’re the Chosen One!?”

At the strange proclamation, Vader’s hard expression faltered ever so slightly, before the black sneer returned. It was such a menacing look, it made Padmé’s skin crawl, reminding her far too much of the man that she had originally been introduced to. She couldn’t let this confrontation occur. She could not let Shmi witness the animal her son could become.

“Stop this,” she turned to Vader, placing her hands on his chest. He didn’t even look down at her. “Stop! He hasn’t done anything. He helped you in the battle, remember?”

Vader snapped cold eyes upon her, causing the young woman to shrink back slightly at the sick purplish hue they’d taken on. Meanwhile, Obi-Wan, still in a bizarre sort of shock, looked about the house, a strangely betrayed look coming over his expression. “He’s the Chosen One?” he asked, looking about as if trying to find someone. “Follow your senses, indeed! You led me into a death trap!”

“Shut up,” Vader snapped, glaring back over at the Jedi. “What are you doing here?”

The Knight turned and stared with an impressive lack of interest at the Sith Lord. “Well,” he drawled, his body surprisingly relaxed, ‘I sensed a shift in the Force and was told to follow it until I found the Chosen One.’ He eyed the taller man with irritated interest. “Apparently I was either misguided or my senses are not as sharp as I was led to believe.”

Shmi came forward then, placing herself in front of Obi-Wan firmly. Vader was forced move his ‘saber away or risk harming his mother. “Please don’t,” the older woman’s voice was very gentle as she pleaded. “He’s a guest here. I can’t let you hurt him.”

The Jedi tensed, and Padmé knew he was getting ready to retrieve his own lightsaber to defend Shmi from the Sith if required. Little did he know that that wouldn’t be necessary.

“This man is an enemy to the Empire,” Vader straightened up, appearing as though he were struggling to reign in his temper. “I can’t let him walk away.”

“Why not?” Obi-Wan quipped, coming to stand before Shmi, guarding her, Vader watching his movements intently. “You did it twice before.”

Vader’s jaw twitched in fury, and his hand shook with barely concealed anger. Padmé reinserted herself between the two. “You go too far, Jedi.”

The Knight regarded him thoughtfully, simply waiting. After a moment or so, when nothing happened, Obi-Wan relaxed his stance again, re-hooking his 'saber to his belt. Never once did the Sith take his eyes off of the other, but the Jedi did not seem disturbed.

Taking a deep breath, Obi-Wan let it out. "Well. It seems I've stumbled in on a rather... interesting situation. With your permission, Lord Vader, I would like to speak with both you and Senator Amidala. I'm afraid that there is much to discuss."

"Yes," Padmé spoke up, placing her hand on Vader's arm. "I think that's a good idea. Truce until things are settled?" she looked up at the Sith, praying he would accept this.

Of course he was not happy with this arrangement. In fact, Vader looked as though he would rather pull his own teeth out than sit down and talk with his arch nemesis. But two pairs of pleading brown eyes were his undoing. So, instead of slicing off the Jedi's head, the Sith snorted before turning and walking away towards the kitchen without a word. Shmi followed after him, while Padmé turned and grabbed a hold of the puzzled Jedi's arm.

When they were all sitting around the table, Obi-Wan apparently realized that Vader's patience was extremely limited, and jumped in before anyone could say anything. "First of all, how are you two still alive?" he asked simply "That explosion..."

"I activated the escape pod," Vader answered blunting, crossing his arms as best as he could with half of one missing.

The older man eyed the injury, but did not comment. "I felt a Force explosion. I had thought..." he sighed. "Why haven't you contacted anyone? Why didn't you dispute news of your death?"

The Sith stiffened slightly, and Padmé next to him. "They think Vader is dead?" she asked.

"They think both of you are dead," the Jedi explained. "There was a state funeral for both of you held on Coruscant, and even a lesser known one on Naboo... The entire galaxy thinks you were both killed."

A very bad feeling settled in Padmé's stomach. No wonder no one had sent search parties after them. No wonder they were still stuck here. It wasn't just their location, no one would ever be looking for them. The entire galaxy thought they were dead... her family!

"Force," she breathed.

Vader, however, didn't seem all that surprised. "I... had felt disturbances," he admitted carefully.

"We need to dispute these claims," Padmé said instantly.

"Why?" Vader frowned. "If the galaxy thinks we're dead, so much the better."

"Better?" the senator asked incredulously. "Better for who?"

"Better for everyone." They all turned towards the Jedi. "Think about it," Obi-Wan continued. "If no one takes into account the possibility that you're alive, you gain a very great advantage."

"Yes," Vader nodded. "I do."

Obi-Wan stared hard at the younger man before nodding. “Yes, I suppose you do. But tell me, Lord Vader,” he leaned forward on the table. “Why is it that I do not feel the Dark Side from you as I once have?”

The Sith straightened up instantly, once again on the defensive. “That is none of your concern.”

“It’s my concern when I feel a source with potentially incredible Force power on the side of Light, and told to find the Chosen One.”

“That ridiculous Jedi Prophecy?” Vader’s lips curled in distaste. “What has that got to do with me?”

“Everything,” Obi-Wan’s voice took on more passion that Padmé could remember ever hearing from him. “You are the Chosen One.”

The room fell silent as the two men stared at one another. The shock within the Jedi had given way to acceptance, the determination returning to his eyes. Vader, however, was struggling to remain calm. Perhaps it didn’t look like an accomplishment to others, but coming from Vader, it was a huge achievement. The old Darth Vader would have just started hacking the Jedi to pieces by now.

“Impossible,” the Sith said at last, glaring down at the table as if it had personally done him wrong.

“And how do you know?” Obi-Wan pushed, making the women nervous.

“Because I am the fulfiller of the Sith prophecies,” he snapped. “I am the bringer of chaos and destruction.”

The older Force user was silent a long moment, and next to Padmé, Shmi seemed disturbed by her son’s revelation. Taking her hand, Padmé squeezed it reassuringly. What Obi-Wan was saying... it didn’t make any sense. Darth Vader could not be mixed up in some old Jedi Prophecy, not if it had something good to say... could he? Over a week had gone by since staying with the Lars, and the more she watched the Sith interact with everyone, despite being distant, he was not his usual self. He was quieter, more reserved and thoughtful.

After a long moment stretched between the four inhabitants of the room, the Knight’s face slowly morphed from one of intense concentration and mystification to slowly morph into understanding. Grey eyes lit up, as they turned to stare at the Sith across from him, and although it was still too early to tell how this interaction would ultimately turn out, Padmé allowed herself to hope. For whatever reason, Obi-Wan was here now, and he was determined to help— in what, she wasn’t sure, but it was enough to ease her nerves.

Smiling rather self-deprecatingly, the Jedi regarded his counterpart for a moment more, before shrugging one shoulder. “I can’t see why you can’t be both.”

The surprise on Vader’s face was quite evident, and his passivity at the comment only swelled the hope that was building up within the senator’s heart.

## 45. Apprentice

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“I can’t see why you can’t be both.”

As the words left the Jedi’s mouth, Vader found himself feeling oddly detached from everything at the proclamation. Both. The Sith’s glory and the Jedi’s hope. It didn’t seem possible. It wasn’t... was it?

Staring back into the earnest blue-gray eyes before him, Vader found himself becoming strangely panicked when faced with such sincerity. This was a joke. Some twisted joke. That was the only possible explanation. And unfortunately for others, Darth Vader was not known to handle jokes very well.

So, after a long moment of sizing the other up, the Sith Lord came to the only logical conclusion available to him. “You’re crazy,” he professed at last.

The Jedi’s pause followed by tense laughter only confirmed Vader’s suspicions. “You know,” the older man smirked, “I think I am. Why else would I have traveled all this way on the slim chance of meeting a legend?”

Vader kept silent, not completely sure how to reply. Chancing a glance over at the two women beside him, the Sith felt a surge of protectiveness as he looked over them. The possessiveness that he had once felt for both of them had dwindled into a fierce desire to keep them safe, no matter the cost to himself. His training told him that this man before him was an enemy, a foe to be dispelled on sight. Yet the Force whispered to stay his hand that twitched for his ’saber. Instinct was going against discipline, an occurrence that had been happening far too frequently recently. It left him with a strange sensation of vertigo.

Reasonably, Vader knew that Kenobi would not harm his mother or Padmé. For whatever reason, the Jedi and the senator had a warm acquaintance with one another that bordered on the line of true friendship. Kenobi had risked everything to try and rescue her on Naboo and in the battle over the planet. And whatever else the Sith might want to call his natural enemy, it could not be said that Kenobi was not a valiant sort of man. Even in the face of Darth Vader, a Sith blade so very close, the Jedi been willing to step in front of Shmi to protect her and the senator from the Dark Lord. That was impressive.

But it hurt. It hurt to think that his own mother needed protection from her son, yet Vader knew Kenobi’s actions were only reasonable. Darth Vader wasn’t known for his mercy or letting anyone get in his way. In the eyes of the Jedi, Shmi had placed herself in a very dangerous position and needed protection....Still. It hurt.

It also hurt to think that Padmé was close to the other man. Jealous burned deeply within him, slapping him in the face at how nonchalantly the Jedi could associate with her and even his mother, could form these casual relationships that Vader was having to struggle so hard to obtain. He knew instantly that Padmé trusted the man, and his mother had quickly come to the conclusion that the Jedi was safe. It hurt to realize that despite their words, both women

still feared him, were still cautious and wary of him, but could form positive opinions of this virtual stranger. They would be fools if they didn't harbor doubts about Vader, but still...

"Lord Vader." The soft tone brought the Sith from his darkening thoughts, and once more he was looking into the stormy eyes of the Jedi. "I know that this all seems... crazy, and terribly unlikely, but you must listen to me. You are the Chosen One. I see that now. I've been trying to fool myself for so long, avoiding the truth of the situation when all the clues were right there in front of me.

"It's time now," the Jedi's voice took on a hard seriousness. "It's time now to end all of this. It's time for the galaxy to come out of darkness and into the light. The Emperor needs to be destroyed, and you are the only one that can do it."

A sneer reflexively came upon the Sith's mouth, and he didn't bother to dispel it. "'Destroy'?" The word sent an odd flare of hilarity through the young man, and for a terrifying moment, he wondered if he wasn't the one going crazy. "Yes. Yes, that's what Sith Lords do." The bitterness that came out was surprising, even to Vader. "Destroying is all I know. It's easy. I was unaware that that was all that was required of the Jedi's Chosen One."

It was Kenobi's turn to scowl. "Perhaps I spoke hastily," he began carefully. "Perhaps 'dispel' would have been a better word. The Chosen One is destined to defeat the Emperor, to restore balance to the Force."

"I do not create balances," Vader snarled, becoming frustrated. He was getting tired of all this foolishness about being something he wasn't. It was pointless to sit here and listen to the same wrong assumption being repeated over and over again. It would have been easier to just destroy the Jedi and be done with it, to be rid of him and go back to figuring out his life. But then, there was a surprisingly strong part of him that was frustrated because he wanted to do something, wanted to help, but wasn't sure how. He couldn't be the Chosen One, he was a creature of Darkness, that was all. And the shame that filled him was nearly too much to bear.

"You can," the Jedi pushed.

"I create chaos!" Vader cried in aggravation, from both his inability to make the Jedi understand and his own confusion at wanting to believe this man.

There was a tense silence that followed, but apparently he'd said something wrong, as Kenobi sat back, smiling at him in a rather unnerving manner. Feeling self-conscious, the Sith found himself sitting up straighter and narrowing his eyes at the other man. His aggression, however, was not met with any form of reciprocation. Instead, the Jedi's smile only widened as if he found Vader's defense amusing.

"Chaos," the older man replied at last, nodding his head. "I see. I find it rather ironic, however, that a man who believes his sole purpose is to create chaos would then yearn and make it his mission to create order in the galaxy."

Scowling blackly, Vader wasn't sure if he wanted to decapitate the Jedi or dispute the statement more. But even as he thought of it, he knew any arguments he could come up with now would be weak. Order was an essential component within the Empire. Without order, there would be no Empire. He and his master had worked very hard to sort through the chaos they had created before the final overthrow of the Galactic Republic, to restore a sense of stability, one that favored the Sith. Inherently, despite creating panic and disorder on various

planets, in the end, Vader did it only to rebuild a balance and organize the galaxy. It was only now that he realized it was because he wanted to rest, that he was tired of the ceaseless rebellion and carrying everyone else's burden.

Chaos was a natural byproduct created by Siths, however. It was their ally, and Vader had used it to its fullest potential over the years. But even Padmé had seen through his guise, and understood his appreciation of order. She had made appeals to him in the past about wanting the same things, wanting peace. True Sith Lords did not care about peace. His master only needed peace to maintain his rule, he did not care if others killed each other, as long as they did not step out of place. Sidious had let his apprentice kill as he wanted, let him destroy and devastate the galaxy.

But was that really what Vader wanted? In many ways, Vader had longed for nothing but to fall into abandonment, to kill and ravage the galaxy that had been so cruel to him. There had been a time when he wanted nothing more than to destroy everyone and everything that stood in his way of achieving absolute power. But as he matured, and as Senator Amidala became more prominent in his life, the Sith had begun second guessing himself.

No, he didn't want chaos. What he truly wanted, more than anything, which chaos seemed to be able to give him, was freedom. Vader had been a slave all his life— Anakin had been a slave all his life. What he wanted more than anything was to free himself from his misery, from the burdens of the galaxy, from all of the expectations thrust upon him. A chance to destroy his master would give him the freedom he had long dreamed of, yet the means in doing so would also chain him to yet more lofty expectations, this time from the other side. It had always been a source of great stress on the young man, knowing that so much was depended upon him, and to find that even more was expected...

"I can't do this," the words came out much quieter, much weaker than he would have wanted, but Vader didn't bother to repeat himself.

"I know this must be a shock," ice blue orbs latching onto eyes the color of stormy seas, 'but you have to listen to me,' Kenobi went on. "I admit I've had my own doubts, but we both need to get over that. We both have our parts to play in how this all ends. You have the responsibility, the honor, of deciding the fate of the galaxy right now. You are the key in how this all ends, and I will stand by you to see that this is completed. Now tell me, will you help me? Will you take on this challenge?"

Three pairs of expectant eyes were upon him, two intense and demanding, one soft and not fully understanding. The decision had to be made, but the Sith wasn't sure he could do it. Not right now, not ever. This was all happening too fast, and he felt lost, like the ground was being pulled out from under him.

Despite having only told Padmé, Vader knew that all three people in the room with him knew he was no longer the might Sith Lord that they had all heard stories of. There just wasn't enough hate in him anymore, enough aggression to fuel the demands of the Dark Side. He had changed, was still changing, and it scared him. And with all the pressure now being placed upon him, he couldn't take it.

"Don't you get it?" he snarled, slamming his hand down on the table, causing the women to jump in surprise while the Jedi did not flinch. "I was destined to destroy the Jedi Order!

That's all I can do. Destroy. Don't you care that I slaughtered your comrades? Even the younglings I showed no mercy."

Both women beside the Sith reacted strongly to this declaration. His mother took on a horrified expression as she stared up at her son, as though she didn't believe it of him. Another wave of crushing guilt flooded over the Sith, and he felt as though his heart couldn't take one more look of disappointment from her. But she had to know the truth. He wanted her to understand him completely before she decided on how she felt about him. Her compassion and willingness to forgive still confused him, and he hoped that by hearing this, hearing all the sins her son had committed would awaken her to the truth, would teach her to hate and fear the creature her son had turned in to. For her own good.

And while the Senator Amidala didn't appear all that surprised, she did look rather ill. The spike of fear he sensed in her did not make much sense to him at the moment. Again, Vader thought back to the strange presence in the Force that he had felt when he had been out in the workshop with her. She was hiding something from him, that much was certain, and while he could easily tear the information from her mind, he would not. He couldn't. Even now, while desperately grasping for any small wisps of Darkness that he could, the idea of hurting Padmé was more than revolting. He had made a choice while on the escape pod, and when it came down to either risking Padmé or himself, he would rather die than let her come to harm.

So while her reaction was troubling, he would let it be. He hardly had the right to push her for answers after all she'd done for him. Like his mother, Padmé was foolish enough to stand by him, to forgive him all of his sin, despite everything he had done. It made no sense, but even though he tried to deny it, tried to suffocate and kill it, Vader couldn't help the small trundles of pleasure that came from knowing that both the senator and his mother were willing to stand by him. That he wasn't alone.

But their reasoning was flawed. They certainly did not know the extent of his crimes, and even though he would have liked to have hidden them, never to be spoken of again, Vader felt compelled to keep arguing with the Jedi, to make his mother and Padmé understand. And so, he pushed on:

"I killed everyone there almost single handed," he remained staring at the Jedi, daring the man to contradict him. "I destroyed your temple and burned your knowledge. Even after the purges, I hunted your kind down, destroying any survivors I found. I've laid siege to entire planets, I've murdered women and children for no more reason than because they were in my way.

"Now," he leaned forward, eyes blazing, "you dare sit there and lie to me about being some sort of Jedi prophecy of hope?"

Kenobi sat a moment, staring back. His posture was slouched ever so slightly, having deflated after the horrible speech, but the determination that burned within him did not die, as Vader had hoped. Instead, the Jedi calmly leaned forward after a few moments of collecting himself, facing the Sith boldly, as he spoke steadily. "I know what I'm saying sounds impossible, but there have been strange tremors in the Force, as you yourself have said. I was led here by the Light, and that Light is coming from within you." Vader flinched. "I feel it. Search your feelings, you know this to be true."



The Force was pushing, pushing, pushing Vader closer and closer to the truth, and he knew that if he just opened himself up and really listened, he would know what he needed to do. There was little point in running when you were already caught. It was a waste of energy and time. Yet Vader couldn't quite let himself step over the threshold and enter into a world where he would know nothing. He had only ever served the Darkness, the Light frightened him. Already standing at the door, the Light burned him, tortured him by showing all of the crimes he had committed. How could they expect him to leave behind all his comfort and willingly walk into a world of accountability? The Light would disintegrate him immediately.

"I don't want to help you," he replied honestly. He didn't want to help anyone. For the first time in his life, Vader just wanted peace, wanted quiet, wanted the galaxy's problems to be someone else's. Let them figure out the galaxy, he was having a hard enough time understanding just himself.

The Jedi smirked, but it was a sad sort of look filled with pity. Vader hated it. "And what will you do then, if you don't come with me? Stay here on Tatooine?"

"Perhaps." The thought had crossed his mind. After so many years, he finally had his mother back. If Shmi was still willing to harbor him after everything that she'd learned about him, why shouldn't Vader stay with her? The galaxy thought he was dead anyway, no one would come looking for him. He could stay here and be with his mother. He could, perhaps one day, be happy.

But Kenobi saw through him, knew his doubts, and that infuriating smirk did not disappear. Instead, it turned almost bored, causing the Sith to itch as he longed to wipe it off of that smug face. "I see," the older man nodded. "And how should you like being a farmer?"

Vader scowled, but he couldn't muster up anything more. He had tried. He had tried so hard to deny this, deny the Force, but the Sith knew when it was a losing battle, knew when fighting was futile. And so, grabbing Padmé's hand under the table, Vader took a long, deep breath and tentatively pushed forward, into a world that he knew so little about. "What would you have me do?"

The surprise he felt was palpable, even from the Jedi. Looking up, Vader saw complete and utter surprise on Kenobi's face, as though he hadn't once thought he would be successful in his quest to procure the Sith Lord's help. Vader might have been more amused by the expression on the once dignified face had he not been thoroughly annoyed at discovering the Jedi had been bluffing the entire time. A squeeze from Padmé stole Vader's attention away from the Jedi as he looked over at the tiny woman by his side. She was smiling up at him, a great sense of pride wafted over him from their connection.

Proud. True approval. It was a feeling he had not felt for a very long time. At a certain point, Sidious had begun hiding his feelings from Vader, and even if his master had approved of anything he did, Vader had been kept unaware of it. Looking over at his mother, he found Shmi smiling brightly back at him as well. Even though she did not know what was really happening, she obviously had gathered that what he son had just done was the right thing.

These feelings he felt now, feeling them for the first time away from the Darkness, out of the shadows was... dizzying. His stomach fluttered with anxiety and excitement, though it left him feeling slightly paranoid, like a child who had disobeyed their parents by sneaking out of bed. It was exhilarating, yet terrifying. What if he got caught? He could always go back

into the Darkness, yet, strangely, now that he was out of its grasp, Vader wasn't sure he wanted to go back. He felt light. He felt... free.

An overwhelming wave of emotion slammed into the young man, and he gasp, his hands trembling. Tears blurred his vision, but he refused to let them fall. He was dizzy and excited and frightened and free. The crushing weight that had always been on his chest had been lifted, and for the first time in his life, Vader felt like he could truly breathe. There was still guilt, still so much he had to atone for, but at the moment, the young man focused solely on breathing, on the sense of profound relief. He had never known how wonderful it would feel to leave behind the Darkness.

When he looked over at the Jedi again, Kenobi was staring at him in awe. "I would have never believed it was possible," the Jedi began quietly. "I never thought it was possible for someone to be redeemed after falling to the Dark Side of the Force."

Once, Vader might have taken some sort of pride in the fact that he had once again accomplished what was thought to be impossible, but at the moment, he couldn't. He didn't feel right, he was disoriented, but taking a shuttered breath, he tried to compose himself as best as he could, to maintain an air of authority. "What would you have me do?" he asked again.

A real smile formed on the Jedi's lips, one not marred by sarcasm or dry humor. It was a bright, happy sort of expression, joyful, and it took everything within Vader not to recoil at the happiness he felt coming from the man. It was uncomfortable, but he still had no desire to turn back to the Darkness just yet, not when he'd first taken a step out. If he ran back now, he wasn't sure he could come out again.

"Come with me," the Jedi leaned forward, smiling. "Come with me, let me train you in the ways of the Light, and I know that together we can defeat the Emperor and true order and peace will come to the galaxy."

It sounded a lot like what the Emperor had promised him, Vader realized warily, yet he sensed that Kenobi wasn't hiding anything. He wasn't even offering anything to Vader personally. There were no bribes or deals to rule and control. There was only the offer of getting rid of Sidious. And while Vader still had his doubts, that offer alone was enough to tempt him to take the Jedi up on his offer.

Looking over at Padmé and his mother to gauge their reactions to all that had transpired, he found both women smiling brightly at him. It still hurt, in a way, to see them so trusting, but now that he had taken his first steps into the Light, it didn't hurt quite so much.

It was surprising when Shmi was the first of them to speak up. "You can help them," the older woman said softly, her eyes warm as they gaze up fondly at her son. Vader's heart ached, the feeling bitter-sweet. "You were meant to help them. Do what you can."

"And I'll be right by your side," Padmé declared boldly.

Again, the pride he felt from both women overcame the Sith, and surprisingly fueled his drive, solidifying his resolve. "Kenobi," he spoke, his voice strong and commanding, demanding authority, "I will go with you."

The Jedi Knight bowed his head respectfully, before smiling up at the younger man, offering his hand. Vader wasn't sure if he should take it, but did so haltingly. When they shook up and down once, Kenobi's eyes twinkled with a strange hint of humor. "I am glad to have you... my young apprentice."

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Later that afternoon, as Obi-Wan waited as the Senator and Vader prepared to leave, he couldn't help but think back over the last several months and winced at how truly dense he'd been. Master Qui-Gon had all but told him who the Chosen One was, had pointed him and guided him to Vader on more than one occasion, and still the Jedi Knight had been too thick to understand what was being all but said. Or rather, had denied the truth from making sense when the idea had come to him before. What a fool I've been, he scolded himself. An utter fool.

As he watched Vader standing before the older woman that had taken he and the senator in, Obi-Wan found it hard to believe that this man— this boy— was really the dreaded Dark Lord of the Sith. While Obi-Wan had never really stopped to ponder what was behind the mask of Darth Vader, he would have never guessed a man like that could lay underneath. Vader was... young. Terribly young. Almost too young to have done all he already had in the galaxy. He didn't even look old enough to be considered for the trials!

But then, there was evidence of trails in this young man's life that he had overcome. The long scar over his eye, lighter ones on his face, and his lack of a limb were testimony to that. At first, Obi-Wan had considered that the severed limb was perhaps an injury from the explosion in the Battle over Naboo, but the metal and mechanical remains still protruding from the flesh of the arm told a different story. Without a word, the Jedi could read the story of a hard life on the Sith's face, one of suffering and hardship. There was so much he wanted to know about the strange enigma in black, but that would have to wait until another time.

Right now he had to focus on what was happening in the now. Qui-Gon had always told him his focus could be precarious. Obi-Wan liked to think ahead, liked to know what was going to happen so he could make plans, but that wasn't always the wisest move. Now was the most important time, now things were happening, and he had to give it his full concentration. Somehow he'd managed to convince Vader to take him up on his offer to train him and he had to make sure that the Sith would not back out.

Their battle of wills had been rather trying at points, the Sith doing everything within his power to resist the offer of helping to right the galaxy just short of physically maiming Obi-Wan, but in all honesty, it had gone a lot smoother than the Jedi would have thought. The moment he had come to realize the truth, the young Knight was more than just shocked. It was as though the galaxy had been playing the cruelest joke imaginable. His hopes had shattered, and he might have seriously considered having Vader just slice him in half right there if it hadn't been for his master's soothing voice whispering to him, telling him to trust and keep hope.

It had been for Qui-Gon, mostly, that Obi-Wan had swallowed the bitter bile that had risen in his throat at finding Vader to be the Chosen One, and it had taken the Force nudging him forward that kept the Knight's hopes alive. Seeing Senator Amidala there too, in obvious support of the Sith, also encouraged Obi-Wan along in his pursuit to convince Vader to join

him. Her part in all of this was of great interest to the Jedi, but he knew he would learn everything in time.

It came as a surprise to Obi-Wan as he was startled from his thoughts when the older woman that had played host to the Sith and the senator threw her arms around Vader's neck—or as best as she could considering he was so tall—hugging him close across the room. For a moment Obi-Wan worried that the Sith might not take kindly to the action, and stiffened, preparing to intervene if necessary. But once more, Vader amazed him still by not only tolerating the affection being shown to him, but actually reciprocating the act, and hugged back. Who this woman was and involvement in the entire affair puzzled Obi-Wan more than anything else thus far had, but he knew he would have to wait to come to an understanding of her role. Like everything else. She obviously meant something to the Sith, but why was a mystery, he itched to understand.

When the two figures pulled apart from one another, after the older woman held Vader's face in her hands and kissed his forehead, cold eyes snapped towards the Jedi, instantly freezing Obi-Wan in place, as if daring the Jedi to say a word. Of course the Knight was smart enough to keep silent, and looked away. The Sith might have been behaving well enough, but that didn't mean anyone should take the neutral mood for granted. There was still a dark aura around the man, one that bespoke of danger and power.

Sensing someone coming near, Obi-Wan turned in time to see the senator stop beside him, eyes trained forward as she watched the older woman and Vader still speaking to one another. There was a quiet smile on her lips. Senator Amidala's involvement with the Sith, the Knight was noticing, wasn't quite what reports had made them all believe it was.

"He's not what I expected," Obi-Wan said as way of introduction.

The senator glanced up at him for a moment, before looking back to the other two figures. "No," she gave a slight laugh. "He certainly isn't."

"How long have you known that he was... like this?" Obi-Wan turned fully to the small woman.

Padmé gave a tired smile, as she turned her full attention to the Jedi. "How long have I known what he looked like?" She shook her head. "Not since coming to Tatooine when he'd had to abandon his suit."

"But you knew he was turning before coming here?"

The woman appeared uncomfortable, before shrugging one shoulder slightly. "No. Not exactly. I just knew that he wasn't... that he didn't always act like a dominating Sith Lord everyone else in the galaxy recognized."

While it shouldn't have, the news surprised Obi-Wan. It made sense, of course, the tremors in the Force, Master Qui-Gon's appearances to him, all this talk of the Chosen One. Of course it would have had to have happened over a progressive period of time. No one could expect Darth Vader to turn to the Light over night. His sudden amiability to helping had taken months of slow progression to get to this point. It was interesting, however, how even Senator Amidala, not being Force sensitive, could tell that the Sith was changing.

...Or maybe, it was because of the senator?

The conversation had to come to an end when the Dark Lord himself came to stand beside them, the older woman next him. "Let's go." It came out more like an order than anything else.

What he was about to do, this entire plan, was going to be difficult, the Jedi knew, but he wrestled with himself not to give up hope or fall into despair. The hardest part of the entire plan was finished; he'd gotten Darth Vader to agree to helping him. But this attitude of his was going to cause some problems, one that Obi-Wan knew he would have to find a way to correct if any more progress was to be done. But for the time being, he would oblige the Sith. "As you wish. Goodbye, ma'am," he turned and smiled at the older woman, giving her a smile. "I thank you on behalf of us all for all that you've done for them, and myself."

The farmer smiled, her dark eyes glistening with sadness. "It was no trouble. Goodbye to you all."

Senator Amidala threw her arms around the other woman, whispering something into her ear, before pulling away. Both sets of brown eyes were moist. "We'll come back as soon as we can."

"I would like that very much. Take care. All of you."

Again, Obi-Wan bowed before he and the senator began walking towards the exit. Vader had paused. Amidala was already climbing up the steps to the outside when the Jedi stopped, looking back over his shoulder. He was just in time to see Vader throw his arms around the woman, crushing her to him, burying his face in the crook of her neck. "I will be back for you, mother. I promise."

"I know," she cooed. "I know. I love you."

Vader said nothing, but squeezed the woman just a little bit tighter.

For his part, Obi-Wan was floored. Mother? Darth Vader had a mother? Feeling a flush of embarrassment at witnessing the tender scene, feeling intrusive, the Jedi quickly ran up the steps, senator Amidala staring at him questioningly. The Knight tried to ignore the look, and was saved only when the Sith appeared beside them. There was no trace of the tenderness he had only moments ago shown, but the indomitable air around him had returned.

Without a word, Obi-Wan led the two to his ship. They were away before Vader, or Obi-Wan, could change his mind.

## 46. Planning

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Huddling in the back of several large cargo crates, Lozor, a young Zabrak rebel, sat panting heavily. He flinched at every sound that came drifting towards his ears, no matter how soft. He was the only one left now, out of a crew of eighty-five, he was sure he was the only one left. He and several other rebels had hired the ship's crew to take them to Antar where they would then rendezvous with some of their comrades before being taken to the hidden base. It had all been going according to plan, that is, until it struck.

It had seemed like an ordinary, routine stop. An Imperial vessel had stalled them, asking questions about their destination. The crew had answered honestly. They had no idea that Lozor or his comrades were rebels, and they gave no indication that they were. As far as anyone could tell, they were just ordinary passengers. They were not suspicious in any way; their secret should have been safe. And perhaps it still was, despite it having attacked.

After they were let go from the patrol, they went on their merry way, only an hour or so from Antar, when it struck. It was like a blur. One moment it was there, the next it was gone. The only reason anyone had been alerted to its presence at all was because one crewman in engineering had managed to get a scream out before it decapitated him. After that, everyone on board had gone to investigate, only to find everyone in the engineering bay dead. Slaughtered brutally.

The entire ship went on alert after that, the passengers obliged to help in the search for the homicidal stowaway. Lozor and his companions had split up, each going with a different group of crewmen. One minute the Zabrak was stalking the halls with the others, the next, the alarms of the ship were blaring. Someone had opened the space hatch. Luckily the ship's emergency blast doors had sealed the breach, but not before twenty or so had been sucked out into space.

The death count had risen to nearly fifty after that episode, and the survivors had all come together after that, too afraid to be separated. Whatever was on board, however, began destroying the ship systematically, breaking pipes and hoses, causing small fires and burnouts. The smoky atmosphere served to create confusion and more panic; the perfect hunting ground.

One by one, it seemed to come out of nowhere, killing and taking those foolish enough to stray behind. It picked them off easily until only Lozor was left. He hadn't even seen the creature fully, either. He'd shot at it, of course, but there had been little he could do. Whatever it was, it was big and whitish. With all the screams, the damage done to the ship, and the alarms blaring, he'd been too disoriented to remember much else, if he'd even actually been able to look at it.

While everyone had been scrambling to save themselves, it was only now that Lozor realized the extent of the damage it had really caused the vessel. Now, as he sat huddled in the only place he could think of to stay, the Zabrak tried to calm himself, but knew it wouldn't work. He was terrified, he was not above admitting it, and he didn't know what to do. How

could he kill something that had taken out over eighty people singlehandedly? He was trained by the rebels, but he was afraid that his training wasn't good enough this time.

A hose burst near him, causing the panicked rebel to jump, and aim his blaster at the offending object. There was nothing there, of course, but the added smoke to the room did not make him feel any better. That creature could be anywhere, and Lozor would never know. His hands shook as he decided to creep forward, to perhaps get to an escape pod... if it hadn't launched them already.

As he crept along, with all of the flashing lights and alarms going off, Lozor failed to notice the strange green lighting above him. Nor could he hear the slightest sound of metal limbs working over the blast of the sirens. He did not see glowing yellow eyes glaring down at him, or hear the low growl that was emitted from what remained of a throat.

And so it was by complete surprise when Lozor was knocked off his feet, falling flat on his stomach, a massive object crushing him from above. He did not have time to even look at his attacker before an intense burning cut into his back. As his vision darkened and his life fled, the Zabrak's last memory in the galaxy was hearing a deep, guttural laugh with the glowing of poisonous green lightsabers as his final illumination in this life.

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Once a course was set and they were safely away from Tatooine, Obi-Wan felt comfortable enough to leave the cockpit to wander to the back of the ship to where the other passengers waited. After leaving the Rebels, the first thing the Jedi had done was go to a rather questionable market to sell the Naboo fighter and acquire a larger vessel for when he found the Chosen One. At the time he hadn't been particularly pleased with how large the ship he'd managed to get was, but now he was grateful, seeing as they had the senator onboard.

When in the back, the Knight found the Sith and the senator sitting together talking in hushed voices. For a moment, Obi-Wan paused, watching them as they conversed. They were rather close together, a sense of familiarity about them. Surprisingly, Padmé did not seem uncomfortable with Vader being so near, and likewise, Vader did not seem to oppose the idea of the senator sitting so close. Their nearness hinted at an intimacy that had yet to be explained to the Jedi. It made him wonder, just how familiar were these two with one another? And had this intimacy formed on Tatooine or before?

But when Vader's cold eyes locked onto his, there was to be no more spying. Obi-Wan calmly walked the rest of the way into the lounge and sat down near the other two. Amidala looked a little embarrassed, for reasons the Jedi could not fathom, as she carefully scooted away from the Sith. It would have been unnoticeable had Obi-Wan not been watching for it.

"Well, we're out and away, but I think we need to settle on where we need to go and to come up with a suitable plan on how to... proceed with all of... this," he stumbled a bit awkwardly, feeling incredibly ill at ease now that the reality of what he'd done was setting in.

"Where are we going now?" Vader's voice came out as a demand.

"I've set a tentative course towards Pzog," Obi-Wan explained patiently, trying not to let his annoyance that the Sith's tone get to him. After all, Vader was sure to have worse qualities than just a demanding nature. Being a Jedi, Obi-Wan could handle rudeness... he hoped.

"I'd like to go to Naboo," Padmé said seriously, leaning forward.

"That's in the opposite direction," Vader pointed out, his voice almost thoughtful.

"And I wouldn't recommend it," Obi-Wan replied gravely. "There're still numerous Imperial patrols about the planet. It's basically been quarantined until the Emperor sees fit. We can't risk detection so soon. We'd lose all element of surprise."

"Then what do you suggest?" the senator snapped, scowling. "I don't like the idea of hiding the fact I'm alive. Especially to my family."

This was always one of the parts about negotiating and mediating that Obi-Wan hated; having to keep secrets and forcing others to keep it as well. He knew for a fact that the Nabberrie family had been devastated when they learned of Padmé's supposed death, and he knew that the senator must be aching to get the truth out to them. But not yet. There was too much riding on them now to ruin their great opportunity by exposing themselves too quickly. It was unfortunate, but Amidala was just going to have to suffer in silence a little longer, and he was going to have to make her see that.

It surprised the Jedi, however, at how well Vader was coping with this situation. He would have thought that the Sith would demand to go to the nearest Imperial base for one reason or other. But then, Vader was also a strategist. Like it or not, the Sith was brilliant and patient when it served his purpose—he knew how to play the game. If he thought it would be advantageous, Obi-Wan was certain the Dark Lord would wait as long as he thought necessary before striking. At least in that it would not be hard to train him.

"Honestly?" the Jedi paused a moment, trying to find a way to break the news without receiving a violent outburst. "While I don't like it, I think our best bet would be to contact and rendezvous with the Rebel Alliance."

"Unacceptable."

And of course it was too much to hope for Vader's cooperation for long. "It's not my first choice either, but I really think it's the best option available to us," Obi-Wan sighed.

"I will not go to the Rebels for help," the Sith sneered.

"Why?" Padmé spoke up, staring hard at her companion. "It's not like they're going to recognize you without your mask. We could make up some story about who you are or something."

"I don't care about that," Vader snapped, glaring down at the tiny woman beside him. "Why are you so willing to go to those who readily tried to destroy you?"

Obi-Wan's eyes widened slightly in understanding. Interesting. Vader seemed more concerned about the senator's safety than his own...

"Where else are we going to get help?" the Jedi interrupted the argument between the two before it could really get underway. "Unless you have contacts you trust, the Rebel Alliance is the only place I can think of that will help replace your arm without alerting certain... authorities."

Without glancing down at what remained of his appendage, Vader's eyes narrowed into slits at the Jedi across from him. "I'm not going to those that had been willing to kill one of



their own on a whim.”

“They only did what they thought was necessary,” Amidala spoke up, turning the Sith’s attention to her. ‘I don’t exactly like what they did,’ she admitted, “but I understand their reasoning, as I know you do too. It’s not like you wouldn’t have done the same thing. And besides, they were after you not me. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“No,” Vader refused. “I will not go to them.”

Patience wearing a little thin, Obi-Wan gave his new apprentice a withered look. “Unless you think you can defeat Sidious with only one arm,” he began dryly, “I suggest you at least let the Rebels give you a new limb.”

The Sith’s scowl was black, his eyes flashing, but he did not comment further. It was clear he resented being outvoted here, but he was apparently also willing to let it go. The reasoning was sound, and Vader knew it. His logic would not allow him to continue arguing fruitlessly. An interesting quality, one that Obi-Wan was sure would come in handy when training the man. Sticking to the fact, reasoning, apparently worked quite well with Vader when he was not lost in a fit of Darkness fueled rage.

“I’ll have to contact the fleet,” the Jedi began again once the bigger man appeared to have calmed slightly. “But before we meet up with them, there are a few things I think we need to discuss. The least of which not being coming up with a plan on how to direct our assault on the Emperor.”

“Leave that to me.” Vader’s words hung ominously in the air.

Obi-Wan was certain he didn’t want to leave that sort of planning solely to Vader, but at the same time he didn’t want to get into an argument that could endanger their fragile agreement. The Sith had given him no lasting promises, did not even truly give his word to help the cause of righting the galaxy. There was a lot riding on keeping Vader in the Light, and it would be foolish to engage in quarreling that might be nothing more than the Sith wanting to establish his authority in their strange situation.

But while the Jedi wished to remain neutral, Senator Amidala did not seem to have any qualms about arguing. “You don’t have to do this alone. Let us help you. We have as much stake in this as you do.”

The Sith stared down at the woman beside him with an odd expression that was mixed between annoyed and putout. “I don’t need your help.”

“Why?” she demanded, not at all intimidated by his harshness. “You agreed to be trained by Knight Kenobi and to help us overthrow the Emperor. We have a right to give our own opinions in this. We have a right to be involved.”

The strong declaration was met with stony silence from the Sith and shock from the Jedi. Obi-Wan had always known that Senator Amidala was quite the spitfire when dealing with things she was truly passionate about. But to see the woman scold Darth Vader so shamelessly, without any hesitation, was still awe inspiring and, quite frankly, terrifying. It was true that Vader had changed, but none of them knew for certain how much, to what degree he was willing to go. It was quite possible for the younger man to slip back into the

Darkness he had only just stepped away from. No one to Obi-Wan's knowledge, had ever come back once falling to the Dark Side of the Force, and thus he did not quite know how to proceed in this matter. He was concerned with pushing too much lest there be a relapse. But Padmé apparently felt confident enough in Vader to do all the pushing she wanted. Or perhaps she didn't know the real dangers that could become of this?

Eventually, just when the Jedi was afraid he'd have to do damage control, the Sith surprised him by answering. "I already have a plan."

Obi-Wan nodded, even while it was the senator's turn to look surprised. "What did you have in mind?" he asked cautiously.

"Wait, you were already thinking of killing the Emperor?" Padmé asked incredulously.

"Of course," Vader answered simply.

"But... why?" she frowned. "You always served him so faithfully. I thought—"

"It is the Sith way for the apprentice to kill the master," Vader explained with a frightening calm. It unnerved the Jedi.

The Sith way had always confused Obi-Wan with its twisted logic and brutal teachings. He couldn't imagine taking on an apprentice knowing that one day he or she would kill him. His mind went back to Kalin, and he just couldn't imagine the sweet padawan that he had cherished turning on him in the end. Qui-Gon's former apprentice Xanatos had betrayed his master and the Order, but Obi-Wan wasn't sure he would have been able to move on knowing a child he'd helped raised, he'd taught, had turned on him. His master's bitterness and hesitation on taking on another apprentice made much more sense to Obi-Wan now. Qui-Gon had been strong to endure such betrayal, one that Obi-Wan wasn't sure he could have survived from.

Looking over Vader, his new apprentice, the Jedi Knight realized that he might yet have a chance to find out Qui-Gon's pain. While the young man had stepped into the Light, there was still a very real possibility of him turning back. In the end, Vader could very well betray them all, could very well turn to evil once more. The thought of losing this apprentice who had already had a taste of the darkness, who was already so powerful in the ways of the Dark Side, who had every chance and reason to betray them, terrified the young Jedi. He had known the task of training the Chosen One would be important, and learning that Vader was the Chosen One meant that Obi-Wan's mission was just that much more complicated and important. But it wasn't until that moment, that he realized just how important, or how difficult his task really was. It was monumental. If Vader betrayed them in the end, there was little hope of the galaxy ever returning to balance, at least not for another one thousand years if prophecies were to be believed.

Coming from his thoughts, Obi-Wan found himself shaking his head as Padmé pressed forward. "But I don't understand... You came up with a plan on Tatooine, or—?"

"No. Before. Before you were even introduced into my care," Vader admitted. "Though your presence helped set up the final pieces I needed to see the scheme to fruition."

"I don't understand," Amidala frowned.

The corners of the Sith's lips curled ever so slightly upwards. It couldn't rightly be called a smile of any sort, or a smirk, but Obi-Wan could sense the other man's dark amusement. Vader was enjoying the guessing game too much. It had to stop.

"Why don't you explain things from the beginning?" Obi-Wan offered, keeping his voice mostly neutral, though with a hint of authority. He was this man's new master, after all.

The Sith regarded him coldly for a second or two, before finally say without preamble. "I have made it possible to instigate a clone rebellion."

Silence.

"What?" Padmé gasped.

"But... but that's impossible," Obi-Wan blinked. "Everyone knows that the clones were programmed so that they were incapable of rebelling against their superiors."

"True," Vader replied smugly, another wave of dark humor blanketed the room. "But if they were to have one leader they favored above all others and given the right orders that are compatible with their breeding..."

"They're all loyal to you," the senator breathed. "You're a hero to them. They'll follow any order you give without thought."

"But I can't see them willingly killing the Emperor," Obi-Wan frowned, a bit frightened by the implications of what such rebellion could mean.

"That's because they wouldn't be the ones killing him," Vader gave a superior look. "They would serve as a distraction, a buffer that would keep anyone else from getting in my way."

"But who would commander them?" the Jedi questioned, still unable to wrap his mind around the grandiose idea of Vader's coup. "You can't be in contact with all of them, and they will need constant monitoring and commands."

"That's why I've already selected officers and several troopers that are loyal to me to serve as head of each squadron and carry out my desires without question."

The senator's eyes widened. "This is Operation Black Hand."

Vader's reaction was immediate as he snapped his head around to glare down at the woman. "Who told you?" he demanded. "Piett? CT-585?"

"No," Padmé denied instantly. "At least... not directly."

"Explain."

At last the senator seemed to remember who she was dealing with, and she looked suddenly nervous. "It was late at night on Naboo when Cory and Firmus were at my house. I couldn't sleep, and I heard them talking near my door. I... sort of listened to their conversation and they mentioned something called Black Hand. They never said what it was or anything," she denied. "I just thought... well, I was worried about Cory since he'd been sick. I just heard the name."

Thankfully, Vader appeared appeased with that answer and the anger left his features, setting into only mild annoyance. Obi-Wan let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

“Yes,” the Sith replied at last. “This is Black Hand.”

“So you set up the perfect coup,” the Jedi went on, hoping to get away from the tense situation. “And you are sure the troopers and the others you’ve selected would carry out any order?”

“Yes,” the large man nodded. “They would still if they knew I was alive. I have no doubt about that.”

“But what if the Emperor became aware of this and called for reinforcements?”

“That’s why I was waiting for a rebel attack,” Vader explained, still so calm while delivering such news. “The confusion they cause would be the perfect cover. All ships and military personnel would be focused on the attack, and added with the troopers I would be commanding to storm around the palace, it would create massive chaos. No one would truly know what was going on until it was too late. I would have killed the Emperor and his most loyal, and once that was accomplished, I could take command of the situation and dispel any remaining rebels.”

Efficient. Coldly efficient and brilliant. If one did not care about the casualties that would no doubt be had from not only the battle, but inevitably in all the confusion, it was quite brilliant. And it made sense. Have the Emperor focus on something else, all the while sneaking in and destroying him while he was looking away. It was efficient and cunning. And it made Obi-Wan uneasy.

“The attack over Naboo would have been the perfect set up,” Vader continued, his expression almost wistful. “It is unfortunate that I was not on Coruscant. I would be Emperor by now.”

A thrill of fear shot through the Jedi. “Such confidence,” he began carefully. “Some might call it arrogance.”

“It’s not arrogance to have faith in one’s own abilities,” the Sith retorted tartly. “I will win against my mast—against Sidious. He has foreseen this. I am more powerful than he is, that’s why he refrained from healing me and kept me in that damned suit.”

Again, a chill ran down Obi-Wan’s spine. The cat and mouse game that Sith masters and apprentices played with one another was unnerving. He just couldn’t image his master or any Jedi master not doing everything within their power to help their padawans if they were hurt and willfully holding back in anything. It was such a cruel existence and made the Jedi think, not for the first time, why a Sith would even bother with an apprentice anyway.

“I see,” he muttered.

“But how did you know to wait for a rebel attack?” Padmé asked. “Besides Naboo, they’ve never engaged Imperials in any sort of real battle.”

“Don’t think so little of me, Senator,” Vader snapped, turning an irritated look the woman’s way. “I knew from the beginning of our bargain that you’d obviously obtained some sort of information and wanted to pass it on to your friends. I let it be because I knew it could very well benefit my plans.”

Senator Amdiala sat staring in astonishment. Obi-Wan, however, while on some level impressed with the Sith's cunning, was not surprised to hear this. He was, however, more interested to learn about the 'deal' he'd heard Bail speak of that Vader brought up now. It was just like a Sith to let an enemy have a taste of success before completely destroying them. Cost was of little consequence to them, and Vader obviously believed he could afford some rebel interference.

"You knew all that time..." Padmé frowned.

"Anything you could have obtained would have either been insignificant or there would be so many security checks and guards on it, it wouldn't matter if the Rebels knew," Vader explained. "In the end, they'd be whipped out by Imperial forces."

It was hard to know if this was true arrogance or just confidence. Vader seemed to have a strong faith in his abilities, as well as having a grounded understanding of the galaxy and the beings that inhabited it. There was such certainty in the Sith's voice, reflected in his eyes, that it was hard for Obi-Wan to dispute his claims. The world seemed to be laid out before Vader's eyes, the future so clear without actually being able to see it. He seemed to believe things would happen the way he believed they would because he would make them happen that way. Such strong will needed to be treated carefully. It could either be a very great strength or devastating weakness in any Force user.

"The point in all this is," Obi-Wan interrupted before the two could carry on their now almost privatized conversation, "that we seem to have a plan on which to go on. We'll just need to make some minor modifications."

Seeing he had their attention, the Jedi continued. "Your plan is sound, and I believe it will work," he nodded to Vader. "Perhaps even better now that you have more support. I'm certain that if we travel to the Rebel Base now and get your arm replaced, I can convince Command to form the distraction we need."

"You forget I will need to be in contact with my men," Vader pointed out, leaning forward, as if sizing Obi-Wan up. The Jedi hoped he met the mark. "I will need to find a way to get into contact with them without rousing suspicion from within the Imperial system."

"Artoo."

The two men turned to the senator. Blinking out of her thoughts, Padmé turned to Vader. "You could contact Artoo or Threepio at the base using your own secure channel."

The Sith frowned. "How do you know about that?"

The senator's smile was vicious. "That's how I got my information. Artoo was able to hack into your system."

"How?!" It was the first time Vader had seemed surprised.

It seemed more than a little crazy that Padmé laughed in the face of Darth Vader, but as Obi-Wan was beginning to understand, there was more going on between the two than what first met the eye. "Threepio told him everything. But don't be mad at him, Artoo's very persuasive."

Vader sat back scowling. "I knew he was up to something. I should have dismantled him when I had the chance."

The senator laughed again, but said nothing, and the Jedi supposed he would find out about this in time, so didn't bother to ask. "Then it's settled," he nodded to the two. "We'll use Vader's plan. Later you can give us a map of the Imperial City and the palace. We'll also need to figure out who will be going where and doing what while we're down in the palace. Once on the base, our priority must be to get you a new arm and from there you'll be able to use the long rang computer systems to get into contact with your men. Are we agreed?"

Vader and Amidala stared at the Knight for a moment, both silent. While the senator appeared impressed by his decisiveness, Vader looked as though he wanted to argue, if just for argument's sake. Obi-Wan sat calmly, just waiting for the younger man to say something, half expecting the Sith with something like, 'I don't follow orders, I give them,' but it never came. Instead, the Sith nodded his consent. Slowly.

"There is one last thing I think we should address," Obi-Wan went on when the others remained quiet. "We're going to need to think of a back story as to how you're alive, Senator, and who Vader actually is."

"That's easy," Padmé said. 'We'll tell them the truth. I survived the crash, and Vader didn't.' At the Jedi's confused expression, she clarified. "Well, Darth Vader isn't here, is he?" she gave the larger man a daring look. "You left him behind. You're Anakin."

The name sent a ripple through the Force. Anakin. Obi-Wan had never heard a name like that before. Somehow it sounded... good. Anakin. For reasons unknown to the Jedi, it gave him hope. This was not Vader, the Sith Lord, only Anakin, the Chosen One.

The big man looked uncomfortable as he glared out into nothingness. There was a slight tremor of nervousness before it was clamped down and could no longer be sensed. It again made the Jedi anxious. He had thought Vader had cast off his former self down on Tatooine, had felt it, but if he could not give it up completely...

"Yes," the man in question answered at last. "I... am Anakin. Vader is... not in control."

But Vader was still obviously existed. The task of training the Chosen One truly would be difficult. Qui-Gon had told him that Darth Vader would be the greater challenge of the two Siths. Remembering this did not make the Jedi Knight all that hopeful. A relapse into the Dark Side was still a strong possibility. Vader had been confident that he could destroy Sidious, but who could destroy Vader if Anakin failed?

The answer, however, seemed to appease the senator, who apparently still did not realize the dangers that could very well come. He would have to warn her, employ her help in keeping Anakin grounded in the Light. Vader's transformation was linked with the senator, of that Obi-Wan was certain. She was in the middle of all of this, and if any progress was to be done, she had to be a part of it.

"All right," Obi-Wan nodded slowly. "Anakin it is. I'm glad to finally know you, Anakin," Obi-Wan smiled.

The other man stared at the Jedi doubtfully. As they studied one another, Obi-Wan was faced with realizing just how big the man was physically. There were very few humans that

could measure up to him. It made the older man worry that the Rebels would be able to guess the younger's identity quickly. But hopefully they wouldn't be sticking around that long for anyone to think too deeply.

"Well," the Jedi stood up smiling as best as he could. 'I need to make contact with the Rebels, you should try and rest, Senator. And you,' he turned to look at the young man. "I've got my first assignment for you."

Anakin's eyebrow cocked upwards. "Really." His voice was incredibly dry and did not sound all that pleased.

"Yes," Obi-Wan nodded, trying his best not to be annoyed and to have some faith in the young man, even while doubts swirled in his mind. "I want you to meditate. When you sit to meditate, give yourself to the Force. Be calm. Try not to think of anything particular. Focus on the calm, let your mind be open. Be at peace. Do not let your mind focus on anger, hatred, or fear. Try and find your center, the tranquility within. If you have any trouble, you may come to me and I will be happy to guide you through the steps."

The other paused, again, not looking pleased. But a look from the senator forced a reply from him. "Very well."

"Good," Obi-Wan nodded firmly. "I will check in on you after I make the call and adjust our course accordingly."

And with that, the three went their separate ways, the senator to a room to rest, Obi-Wan to the cockpit, while Anakin stayed in the lounge. As he went to contact the Rebels, the young Knight couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. This was all going much smoother, yet much more difficultly than he would have imagined. It was smooth because they had a plan and his new apprentice was complying—in the end—with Obi-Wan's orders. Yet it could only be the appearance of smoothness. There were so many ways in which this could fail and Vader would return. After all, if they went through with this, they would, in essence, be fulfilling Vader's aspirations, and it would be so easy for him to simply take the throne and destroy them after his former master was dead.

I'll just have to make sure I don't fail then, he thought, as he adjusted his headset and started making calls.

## 47. Rebels

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It had been several days since going to Aldeeran, but little had been accomplished. Sitting in the lounge of the Rebel bulk cruiser *Freedom*, Master Yoda watched Senator Organa with concern. The human was taking the failure to contact his wife poorly. Because of the slaughter at the palace, their ship had not been permitted to land as the planet had called a state of emergency. Imperial Storm Troopers had been unleashed for security purposes, while a virtual blockade had been placed around the planet. There had been little they could do, and it had been between risking a run through the blockade or playing it safe and rendezvous with the Rebels to strategize. Despite being desperate, Bail had thankfully seen the wisdom in coming to the Rebels for help. There was little doubt in the old Jedi's mind that the senator would have tried to run the blockade had he been alone, but with the others there, he'd been forced to see reason. The only blessing of the entire situation was now that Bail was off Naboo and moving, he no longer felt trapped or as helpless.

But now that they were here and there was little else to plan, the poor man again did not look well. Dormé had tried to comfort him, but after a while, decided to give him space. It was pointless to try and cheer a man who simply did not want to be cheered. Instead, the handmaiden had gone off the help where she could, unable to keep idle since the Battle Over Naboo. Hand-to-hand combat skills were being taught to several groups on board and she went to see if she could assist. There was little doubt, however, that she would be back for the senator, unable to stop worrying for him.

The ship, Yoda had to admit as he looked around, was well equipped and state of the art. He had asked how the Rebels managed to acquire such a vessel, but his questions had been misdirected and passed on until they faded into the background, all thought of answers forgotten. By the discomfort he felt and defensiveness, he'd let it go, not wanting to start any unnecessary arguments. It was safe to assume, however, that they had obtained the ship through less than ideal methods.

Sitting in the quiet of the ship, the small green Master tried to relax, tried to clear his mind of all the troubles that had fallen onto him for the past several years. So much had happened in the past four years. Much too much. While he was sure he was exaggerating, he felt as though he had aged more in the past four years than he had over the near nine hundred before them. The exaggeration, however, was only slight. Things were happening in the Force, big things, and he needed to appreciate the calm while he could. He knew these moments weren't going to last too much longer, and he would have to be ready for when the peace broke, despite how old he felt.

A spike in the Force jolted the old Jedi from his thoughts. Opening his eyes, he turned slowly to look about him, taking in his surroundings yet again. Bail still sat in the same position, slumped over slightly, elbows on his knees. Since leaving Naboo, the strange surges in the Force he had been monitoring had occurred more and more frequently. Today, however, it seemed to be coming closer. Things were going to happen, perhaps it was time to get the senator out of his slump and get him active again. It was time to get his mind off of his wife and prepare for events that were rapidly approaching.



“Bail,” he called, causing the senator to jump. The man’s eyes were bloodshot and there were dark bags under his eyes. “To command, we must go. Happening events are.”

It seemed to take the senator a moment to comprehend what was said as he sat still, blinking, before he finally nodded and stood. Together the two made their way to the command center where Mon was currently residing, overlooking command control. The moment they entered, the Chandrilan turned to them, a frown on her lips.

“It would seem Knight Kenobi has returned to us,” she informed them crisply.

Hearing that the younger Jedi had returned filled the old Master with relief. When they had gotten onboard, Yoda had inquired after his young protégé, and was told only that the younger Jedi had indeed been there and left soon after the battle over a week ago. The reasons for Obi-Wan’s sudden departure were never explained, only vague answers given. And like the questions about the possession of the ship, Yoda had wisely let it be. Rebel Command was hiding something, of that he was certain, but for the time being, he would let it be and see what became of it. In his experience, hidden truths did not stay hidden all that long.

Bail, however, having not paid much attention to things when they arrived, smiled slightly, finding nothing amiss. “Good. It will be good to see him.”

As if knowing to respond to the Aldeeranian, the com buzzed. “Rebel Command, this is Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi. Requesting permission to dock and come aboard.”

The voice sounded amiable enough, if a little tired. Honing in on the younger man’s Force signature, Yoda was surprised to feel not only fatigue, but fear, with an overarching sense of determination. And there was not merely Obi-Wan’s presence alone. With him was a nearly overwhelming Force signature that the small green Master had never felt the likes of before. It was Light, but just barely. The feeling was of a strange almost neutrality, the same one that they had felt since the death of Vader. It took a moment for Yoda to realize that that same neutrality he’d felt blanketing seemingly everything was not because there had been a balance since the Sith Lord’s demise. The feeling had come from a being, one that was now beginning to come into the Light. One that was now on board Obi-Wan’s ship. One with tremendous potential.

“Knight Kenobi, you are clear for entrance,” the reply cut off the old Jedi from his musings, bring him back to the present.

Whatever was happening here, it would certainly change the outcome of the struggle between good and evil. And while Yoda tried not to get his hopes up, he was cautiously optimistic in believing that perhaps Obi-Wan had indeed been successful in finding the Chosen One. Although, the younger Jedi’s distinct lack of excitement gave the Grand Master a moment of pause. Perhaps things were more complicated than previously believed? Or maybe something had happened to dampen any joy felt at finding the Chosen One?

“Come,” Yoda called to Senators Organa and Mothma. “To Obi-Wan we must go.” Although a terrible trait in a Jedi, Yoda found himself becoming too impatient to wait much longer. He wanted answers, and he wanted them now.

The two humans looked at one another for a moment before following. Mon, Yoda noticed, did not look anxious to see the younger Jedi. In fact, there was a definite dread about her. There was definitely something going on here, something that Yoda was determined to

find out. Perhaps when Obi-Wan was on board everything would make itself clear? He was going to get to the bottom of this even if he had to use some Force suggestions to get it out of Mon— and Obi-Wan if necessary.

As they walked through the ship towards the hanger, Dormé suddenly made an appearance, rushing over to them, a steaming drink in hand. “Wait!” she called, ‘Here,’ she gently, handing the drink over to Bail once she was beside them. “I was just on my way to see you... It’s good to see you up.”

The senator smiled down at the young woman gratefully. It always gladdened Yoda’s heart whenever he saw true concern and caring from others. Dormé was a good woman, very kind and compassionate, loyal and humble. As he so often did now since the destruction of the Order, Yoda couldn’t help but note how very Jedi-like the young woman was. She would have made a fine apprentice had she been born Force-sensitive. It was, of course, all fanciful thinking, but it was one way the small master could hold fast and not slip into despair. Connecting with others that had similar qualities to his fallen brethren helped ease the pain, if only marginally.

Pushing fantasy from his mind, however, Yoda turned his full attention to now. Right now there was nothing more important than this moment. The Force sang in agreement. Whatever or whoever Obi-Wan had in the ship with him would change the outcome of this struggle for power. Yoda just knew it.

As the small troop came to the bay, they were just in time to see the ship come to rest and watch as the doors opened. A moment later, Obi-Wan stepped out, looking about almost warily. When stormy eyes came to rest upon the group, he gave tight smile. “Hello there.”

“Obi-Wan, my friend!” Bail beamed. “I am glad to see you. It’s been too long.”

The young Jedi smiled more genuinely, a twinkle suddenly coming into his eye. “And I, you.”

“I’m glad to see you too.”

The feminine voice that now spoke caused the entire group to freeze in place. Reaching out with the Force, Yoda was shocked at what he found. He might not have believed it if Senator Padmé Amidala herself hadn’t walked out of the ship, smiling a tired, yet very pleased smile. She was alive!

“Padmé!” both Bail and Dormé exclaimed at the same time, both running over to their friend.

Yoda watched, standing still beside Mon, as the three reunited. Dormé reached Padmé first, flinging her arms around the other woman, hugging her close. Bail, not to be outdone, wrapped his arms around both women, and squeezed them tightly, laughing. They all spoke at once, making coherence impossible, but it brought a great sense of relief and joy to the Grand Master’s worn heart. Even after so much darkness had arisen, there was still light in the world, still goodness that was to be cherished.

But his attention to the happy reunion could not remain focused, as the strong Force presence made itself known, suddenly dominating everyone’s attention. All chatter and happy

laughs ceased the moment a dark figure emerged from the shuttle. For a moment, everything seemed to fade away, everything except him.

Standing just off of the ship's ramp was a tall, imposing young man. His features were distinct and grim, his eyes cold and sharp. A long scar ran down from his right eye, and he was missing most of one arm. Although it was not impossible, the young man's height was considerable, towering over both Senator Organa and Obi-Wan. It was in that moment that Yoda came to realize he was looking at the Jedi's Hope.

This was the Chosen One.

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As Anakin came down the ramp, and all eyes came to rest upon the stranger, Obi-Wan nearly groaned. How did I think that this could work?

Even without the mask and helmet, it would not be terrible hard to put the pieces together and figure out that this young man was, in fact, Darth Vader. If his unusual height didn't give him away, his severe, cold countenance could easily hint at his identity to any half-way inquisitive mind. It was almost as though he still had the mask on with his jaw set harshly, his eyes so icy and pitiless. Glancing over at Master Yoda, Obi-Wan knew that the old Jedi would not be fooled long, if indeed, he was fooled at all.

Not wanting to get into a debate, the young Knight decided that it was time to take matters into his own hands. "Well!" he spoke loudly, gaining everyone's attention. "We've had a long trip, and my friend here, as you can see, is in need of medical attention."

Almost as one, all eyes went to Anakin's lack of limb. The former Sith's eyes hardened, discouraging staring, and sending a definite ripple throughout the Force. An uncomfortable tension filled the air and it took all of Obi-Wan's Jedi training not to squirm or just stab himself with his lightsaber to end all his troubles right there. Both Mon and Yoda were already suspicious, there was no doubt about that.

"How is this possible?" Senator Mothma asked, eyes turning to stare firmly on Padmé. "You... you're supposed to be dead. Your shuttle—"

"This isn't the place for such questions," Amidala stepped forward, interrupting, hopefully hiding the terrible scowl that morph onto Anakin's lips. "A lot has happened and Anakin is in need of some medical attention. Perhaps once we have seen to that we'll be able to talk?"

It was clear that no one was satisfied with the proposition, a million questions buzzing agitatedly in the air just waiting to be asked, but eventually they agreed, Mon leading the way through the ship towards the medical wing. Padmé was immediately ushered to the front of the group by Bail and Dormé, who were prattling off nonsense, though Obi-Wan suspected it was more from nervous, excited energy than anything. Seeing the other senator alive and well had sent a definite adrenaline rush through the group, some good, some not so good.

But while the others walked in front, the Knight turned to his new apprentice and nodded his head, gesturing for the young man to follow. With extreme reluctance, Anakin nodded back, following the group, catching up easily and keeping close to Padmé. About to follow, the young Jedi realized that Master Yoda had yet to move. Looking down, suppressing a groan, Obi-Wan found himself staring into hard green eyes. Master Yoda was not happy.

“I will tell you everything soon, Master. I promise,” Obi-Wan said quietly, hoping that that would be enough for the time being until they were alone.

Thankfully, it was, as the Grand Master nodded before proceeding to quickly crawl up the younger Jedi’s back. Waiting patiently until the old creature was settled, Obi-Wan took off to follow the group. It was not hard to catch up to the group as Anakin’s frustrated impatience could be clearly sensed throughout the ship. I’ll have to go over shielding such negative emotions with him again, he thought as he caught up, walking beside his apprentice casually. Sith Lords were not, after all, accustomed to having to shield such things.

After a long, strained walk, they finally made it to the medical wing where Anakin was quickly ushered into a private room by a droid, who sat him down on an operating table. The rest of the company stayed out, watching through a one-way window. For a moment, the group watched as the droids cut through the bandages over the remains of the injured limb. It had been agreed to unanimously while on their way to intersect with the Rebels that the remains of Anakin’s mechanical arm would have to be removed, lest suspicion be mounted as to its origins. It had been painful, Obi-Wan was sure, having to dig and cut into skin and bone to remove everything, but as suspected, Darth Vader knew how to handle pain. Astonishingly, the worst reactions Anakin had given were a few winces and grinding of teeth.

When the droids had the young man lay down on the table, it seemed to be the sign everyone was looking for, as the group turned to look at Senator Amidala and himself. “How is this possible?” the Chandrilan woman was the first to demand answers. “If you’re alive, then by all rights Darth Vader—”

“No,” Padmé interrupted before panic could take strong hold over everyone. “You needn’t worry about Vader.” Bold words, yet the Naboo woman truly believed them, even when the Jedi Knight couldn’t be so sure.

Mon did not look convinced. “But if you did without wearing armor, then how could Vader not have survived?”

The younger woman smiled ruefully as she shook her head. “Ironically enough, I think his armor protected me more than him.” At the confused looks she received, the senator went on to explain how there had been a small escape pod in her father’s shuttle, and how in order to fit them both in, Vader had essentially had to hold her. By doing so, he had acted as another layer of shielding for her while he’d had none.

“When I woke up from the crash,” Padmé concluded, “I eventually went towards the remains of the pod. It was burning, and inside I saw Vader’s helmet and armor. There was no way anything could have survived that fire.”

In all of his years as a Jedi, the art of lying had always eluded Obi-Wan, or at least the art of lying believably. Of course the Jedi did not condone lying, but there were times when it was undeniably useful. Master Qui-Gon had been an expert at word craft, skating around the truth so finely that it was always exceedingly difficult to know the difference between a lie, half truth, or whole truth with him. It had always frustrated Obi-Wan while he was his apprentice, never quite able to feel right as he helped in deception. But it had certainly helped his old master in negotiation and diplomacy.

Like Qui-Gon, Senator Amidala certainly had this gift. It was hard to believe that she was so calmly deceiving them all with the truth. As he listened to her through the Force, he could detect not a hint of untruth being spoken and her tone was cool and genuine. The words themselves were the absolute truth, yet the situation was not what it seemed, and she did not bother to correct anyone's ideas or go into strenuous detail. It was little wonder she had been such a successful politician all these years, and at such a young age. She was marvelous.

After a moment, when the words had finally sunken in, the tension in Senator Mothma's shoulders eased, and she bowed her head, an almost-sigh escaping her. "Then our attack succeeded. Better than we'd hoped," she said, letting out another breath.

"But where did you land?" Bail interrupted, eyes fixed solely on Padmé. "Where have you been?"

"Tatooine," Amidala explained, and took up her tale again, about how she had woken up, walked into Mos Espa. "Eventually, Anakin's family took me in."

"Anakin?" Bail frowned.

Padmé glanced over at Obi-Wan for a moment, before smiling, shaking her head. "I'm sorry. I suppose we never really introduced him. Anakin's the young man there," she pointed through the window, where Anakin still laid, droids hovering all around him. Wincing in sympathy, the Jedi realized that they'd put an oxygen mask on the younger man and were giving him pain shots to begin their procedure. It would not be a pleasant experience.

But Obi-Wan's attention was drawn away from the obviously excruciating situation as Mon spoke up again. "Tatooine... isn't that a Hutt controlled planet?"

"It's technically Imperially owned," Padmé explained, "but as I was told, the Imperial government is not above accepting bribes from the Hutts."

Beside the other senators, Bail snorted. "It's a wonder Vader let that happen. You remember the last time it was found out that locals were bribing governors?"

"Yes, but Tatooine has such little relevance within the Empire," Mon argued. "More than likely, the Emperor was hoping that everyone would destroy themselves and didn't both to send Vader out to do it."

While rather crude, the assessment was not wholly implausible, but Obi-Wan knew better. From what he had gathered thus far from what was and wasn't said, the young Jedi knew that Anakin did not like Tatooine. Despite having argued that he wanted to stay on the planet with his family, from the little things Padmé had said and described, and the younger man's reaction to talking about the planet, Anakin still didn't like the planet. Peering into the Force had even shown a great revulsion the young man held towards the planet. Whatever history he had with the planet, they weren't necessarily fond, even with having his mother there. So it made Obi-Wan wonder if as Darth Vader, Anakin couldn't have cared less about the dessert world or if its government and gangsters killed each other.

Eventually, Padmé picked up her story again, about how she had stayed at the Lars Farm and how she waited there until Obi-Wan had showed up unexpectedly. And from the expectant looks, the Jedi knew it was his turn to relate what had happened. "It was completely by the will of the Force that I found her," he began simply. "My quest to find the Chosen One

had led me to the Lars Farm, and while I discovered Anakin, Senator Amidala was there also.”

“Thank the Force,” Bail chuckled. “I’m so glad you’re all right, Padmé.”

The younger senator smiled warmly at her friend, taking his hand in hers and squeezing it. “Thank you. And I’m glad to see that you’re all well, too.”

“The arm wound?” Yoda spoke up for the first time. “Obtained the wound in what way did young Lars?”

Padmé made a face at the question, but Obi-Wan ignored it as he spoke up. “We’re not completely sure,” he admitted. “He was already missing the arm when I met him.”

When the Grand Master turned his gaze over to the senator, Padmé shrugged ever so slightly. “He was missing his arm before I saw him.”

Again, Obi-Wan was amazed by her quick thinking and word chose, all done without stumbling or bringing any suspicion upon herself. She had told the Jedi what happened to Anakin’s arm when the former Sith had been meditation on the ship several hours ago when the two were coming up with their story to tell the Rebels. The account of how the senator had watched the young man sever the useless limb while she hadn’t known it was false both amused and slightly disturbed the Jedi. The boy had a lot of secrets, but when he revealed them, it was not tactfully done. His disregard for others feelings was yet something else they would have to work on.

Eventually, after more questions about who and what all had happened since they had all last seen one another, the group began to disperse. Senator Amidala was reluctantly led away to another room for a physical by Dormé, while Bail, seemingly empowered by seeing his dear friend alive again, went with Mon back to command control to organize and plan what the Rebels would do next. That, of course, left Obi-Wan alone with Master Yoda.

Together, the two Jedi watched quietly as the droids worked on Anakin’s arm. Sometime during their talking, the young man had been put to sleep, probably so he would not feel much of the effect as they drilled into his bone in order to replace the mechanical pieces needed. Just thinking about it sent a chill down Obi-Wan’s spine as he winced in sympathy. It was without a doubt a agonizing procedure. Usually the bone drill was a onetime procedure, the rest of the limb being detachable for growth or damage purposes, but Anakin was unlucky enough to have to have yet another because of not only their circumstances, but the fact that his original mechanical arm had been very low quality and poorly attached to begin with.

But as the sounds of the drilling faded away, and the droids began assembling and attaching the new limb, Master Yoda finally spoke. “Much anger I sense in him. And fear.”

Unable to deny it, Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes. But he’s still learning.”

Yoda raised an eyebrow up at him, making the younger man feel incredibly foolish. But remembering Qui-Gon’s words helped him keep his resolve. If this was going to work, if Anakin was truly going to purge the remains of Darth Vader from within him and fulfill his destiny as the Chosen One, he would need Obi-Wan’s full support. He could not let Anakin feel otherwise.

Lifting his chin in stubbornness, the younger man stared down at the old master waiting for the complaint he was sure to get. Yoda's eyebrow twitched upwards, apparently not expecting such insolence from the usually respectful Knight. After a beat, however, the small creature looked away with a huff. "Qui-Gon's defiance I sense in you."

Being compare to his old master caused the corner of Obi-Wan's lip to twitch upwards for a moment, his features softening. It was one of the best compliments that he had ever gotten and the Force warmed around him, as though his master were smiling with him. "I will train him, Master. Even if I don't have your support, I'll train him."

"He is too old," the Grand Master began walking away. "Yes. Too old to begin the training."

Having no choice but the follow, not wanting to cut ties with his Master because of this, Obi-Wan tried to reason with the ancient being. "He knows so much, Master."

"How?" Yoda stopped, glaring up. "From where did he get his knowledge of the Jedi arts?"

"I don't know," the younger Jedi replied truthfully. Anakin had told him about reading Jedi technics in order to understand and destroy them easier when he'd been Darth Vader, but honestly, Obi-Wan didn't know what texts or from where he had gotten them. "But Master, surely you see the prudence in training him! If we don't, you want to let Sidious discover him? Do you want another Darth Vader?"

The moment he said the name, Obi-Wan regretted it. Master Yoda stiffened at the mention of the Sith Lord, and the Knight knew that the old creature was perhaps on to him. He was not as skilled at deflecting and misguiding others beliefs as Senator Amidala was, and if asked directly, he wasn't sure he could lie to his Master. But he hoped, prayed to the Force, that he would not have to explain how Darth Vader came to be in the Rebel Base.

"Another Vader?" Yoda said quietly, musing out loud. 'No. The cycle of Sith, broken must be.' He sighed wearily. "Do you promise to finish what you have begun?"

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan replied immediately. "I will not fail."

The green creature eyed him. "Afraid you are," he commented. "You should be."

With that, Yoda walked away, leaving Obi-Wan to contemplate all that had been said. It had gone smoother than expected, yet he knew better than to trust that this discussion was over. After he had had time to think, Obi-Wan had no doubt that the Grand Master would be back to interrogate him again, demanding more answers. But for the moment, the worst of it was over, and perhaps they could get out of here before anyone came to realize the truth behind what was not spoken.

It was amazing neither Mon nor Yoda had demanded more out of him or Padmé, but then, both had been incredibly shocked to discover the senator alive, and the Chosen One in their company. And both were known to bide their time, waiting for more. It was in their nature. Hopefully we can be gone in a day or so, Obi-Wan thought as he began a slow walk back towards Anakin's room. He wanted to be there if and when the former Sith woke. After all, he wasn't sure if the boy would remember where he was after the anesthetics, and it certainly

would raise a lot of questions and tensions should the Chosen One destroy the medical room in a fit of confused anger and fear.

Just as Obi-Wan came into view of the room he'd left his apprentice in, he noticed Senator Amidala sneaking in. Curious, he decided to go to the room he had just come from, hiding behind the one-way window. Silently, he watched.

The senator waited at the entrance at first, watching as the droids began to disperse. When it became apparent that they were no longer working, she crept the rest of the way in. It was strange to see her behave so timidly, yet perhaps the thought of Anakin waking in less than a good mood had crossed her mind as well. But once she established that he was still unconscious, she quickly bridged the gap between them until she was by his side. Once at her destination, she looked over the still form, smiling slightly.

Curiosity gnawed at Obi-Wan, but he forced himself to remain still and silent. Without hesitation or fear, Padmé raised her hand and began carding her fingers through the former Sith's hair. The gesture was so familiar, as was the small, warm smile that came over her face as she stared down into the still man's face. There was so much real affection in that smile that again, Obi-Wan marveled at the casualness of her actions. Perhaps there had been more truth to those stories he'd heard about Darth Vader and Senator Amidala being a couple...

As Padmé continued to run her fingers through Anakin's hair, which had no doubt grown since the battle, the senator looked down at the new limb. Obi-Wan, too, turned his attention to the appendage and found that the droids had done a fine job. With a little bacta on the skin that surrounded the metal, Anakin could have the full use of his arm in a matter of hours. Of course the boy would have to get used to the new limb, so training would go a little slower. But slower in this case might just be better. They could really concentrate on the basics, the drawing of the Force from tranquility rather than passion.

The sound of laughter brought the Jedi from his musings, and his eyes automatically trained on the senator. She was chuckling. "Two," she said out loud. "There's two."

Confused, Obi-Wan frowned. Two? Two what? Unfortunately, the senator did not speak again, just kept carding her fingers through the blonde hair beneath her hand. She wore a dreamy sort of expression, almost wistful. What could she be thinking, the Jedi wondered? What could make the senator so... sad?

Padmé chuckled again, shaking her head. Leaning over, she kissed Anakin's forehead before walking slowly from the room, leaving Anakin to recover and Obi-Wan in a state of shock. She'd kissed him. She'd kissed Darth Vader.

Desperately trying to piece this odd puzzle together, there was only one real conclusion that Obi-Wan could come to, despite wanting it to be the last thing in the galaxy to be true. But the Force sang in confirmation to his musings, and he could not deny the facts: Senator Amidala and Anakin, perhaps even while Darth Vader, had a relationship.

What is left to surprise me now? he thought, still shocked. But even as he thought this, he repented, knowing that he should not tempt the Force. With his luck there was bound to be something else just as or more shocking than this.

And so, leaving Anakin to recover, Obi-Wan slipped away from the room as well, determined to get some answers of his own out of Padmé.



## 48. Revelations

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Padmé sat on the bed in the room that Dormé had said she could use while on the ship, staring at the wall blankly. Twins. She was having twins. Before when she had learned of her pregnancy initially she had been surprised, completely panicked. Now... now she was so shocked she was numb, not understanding why she was. Of course she was having twins. Why would she ever think differently? With the way her life was going, it shouldn't have been such an astonishment.

A laugh escaped her before she could hold it back. Twins. The thought of one child had sent her into fits of terror and worry. What would Darth Vader think of having a child? What would he do? Now she was presented with a new problem: how would he respond to two?

Falling back on the bed, hands on her stomach, Padmé closed her eyes, even as tears streamed down from the sides, still laughing. Twins. The thought filled her with so much warmth and hollowness. Not only was she responsible for the life of another, but the life of two others. She was not living for herself anymore, she had to think and plan for two more. She had to protect two more against the Empire and the Sith. Possibly to protect them from their own father...

A pang of bitterness surged through the young woman, nearly overwhelming her. It caused her to laugh harder. She just couldn't help but feel guilty. Guilty because her children would possibly have to grow up without knowing their father. Guilty because her children might not even get a chance to grow up. Guilty that they would have to live with their own guilt at knowing who and what their father was and had been. Guilty because she hadn't even told their father and might never.

But how could she? How could she talk to Anakin— to Darth Vader— about this? His reaction to surprises was a lot better than they had been when they first met, but that did not mean she was willing to risk him erupting in a fit of rage. She was pushing her luck as it was, Padmé knew, and in all honesty, despite trying to dilute herself, she knew there was a strong possibility of Anakin falling back into the Dark Side, of becoming the creature that had hurt her time and time again.

In all her years, Padmé had never let a man get the best of her. She never allowed herself to become dependent on anyone personally. Men had always been seen as a source of trouble, nothing to take much pleasure in. Growing up, she told herself she would not be the woman who fell madly in love with a man and give up everything for him. She would not be weak and cry and feint or kill herself should he walk out on her as all the fair damsels in fairytales did. That was not in her personality. Padmé Amidala was a fighter. She didn't need anyone to survive. She didn't need Anakin.

But she wanted him. For reasons that went beyond her understanding, Anakin had wormed his way into her heart— into her soul. Every time she looked in, there he was. Her life no longer seemed to make sense at the thought of him not being there. She wanted him to be there, wanted to help him, keep him close.

But she didn't need him. If worse came to worse, she could detach herself from him. After everything he'd done to her and the galaxy, after what he had been, she could leave him. Darth Vader was a monster, she knew that, an oil spill in the galaxy that suffocated all life in all its forms. What if he would snuff out the lives of their children? Why would she even want him? What was to say that he even wanted her? Or them?

It was all so confusing. It had been from the very start of their association with one another. Both knew the other was using them, both knew that whatever they had with one another was a ruse, a shell of what other couples had. And yet how she craved to have more with him. He had poisoned her, his love a drug. Despite everything, all the abuse and cruelty, she wanted more, so much more. Every time she thought to turn away, to give him up completely, he was still there, waiting for her for when she inevitably looked back.

But this wasn't about her anymore. Not just her, at least. In the end, even if it would break her heart, even if she didn't want to, Padmé would turn away from Anakin if she thought it was necessary. Because even though she had not known of their existence until a short while ago, she would do anything to protect her children. The tiny little beings within her womb were her top priority now. Although she was sure it would hurt her if Anakin fell to the Dark Side again, if he once more adorned the title of Sith Lord, Padmé would not wait for him. Her children needed her far more than their father did. To preserve their lives, she would leave the man she had fallen in love with. Even if it hurt.

Again, she placed a hand on her stomach, wondering at the thought of life within. When Dormé had suggested getting her checked up, Padmé hadn't been able to think of an excuse not to. Of course she'd resisted mildly with the typical, 'that's not necessary' refusals, but with Dormé being particularly stubborn, that hadn't worked. And not wanting to arouse suspicion, the senator had allowed herself to be taken away.

Of course that meant that Padmé had had to get creative. Thinking quickly, she asked her handmaiden to get her something to drink. Dormé had not refused. And the moment the handmaiden was out of the door, the senator counted to ten before hopping off the examination table and closing the door, locking it. She ordered the medical droid to keep the door closed and to keep all findings strictly confidential. Of course it was program to alert anyone if there was a life-threatening situation, but Padmé didn't need to worry about that.

So instead, she was able to somewhat relax, knowing that no one could see her—there being no one-way window in this room—and permitted the droids to look her over. They checked her injured ankle, the bumps and bruises she still had, before proceeding with checking up on the baby. When they had declared that both were healthy and developing normally, the senator had been more appreciative no one had been in the room with her. How stupid she must have looked as the words sunk in.

Twins. Both fine. It was great and wonderful news. It should have been the best news of her life. And yet the moment had been tainted with so much doubt, so much uncertainty.

A signal at the door startled the senator. Sitting up, she smoothed her clothes, once more wondering if she was showing, before wiping the remaining tears from her face. When she hoped she looked presentable, there being no mirrors in the room, Padmé calmly walked over to the door and opened it. She had expected Dormé or Bail, so she had trouble hiding her surprise at finding herself once more facing Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Before she could say a word, or even recover, however, the Jedi pushed himself into the room, saying simply, “We need to talk.”

Even though she was annoyed and would have loved to send him away, there was little point in it. Obi-Wan was already in and it was likely that what he had to say was important. Immediately her mind went to Anakin. “Is Anakin all right?” she asked.

The Jedi took on a thoughtful expression before nodding slowly. “He’s currently still asleep.”

Padmé frowned a moment, but knew Obi-Wan was right. She was fairly certain that she’d know if Anakin was in distress. The strange link she had with him would have alerted her, or at least given her a feeling that something was amiss. “Then what can I do for you, Master Jedi?”

Obi-Wan’s eyes bore into hers, in the lighting of the room, causing them to appear a stormy green. It was a little unnerving. After what felt like an eternity of standing still under his scrutiny, the Jedi sighed. “Senator,” he began tiredly. “You and I are undertaking probably the most dangerous and important task in the galaxy this century. It is our responsibility and duty to see Anakin through his transition from the Dark Side to the Light, and to help him destroy the Emperor without falling back into Darkness. That being the case, I had thought that we would help one another and hold nothing back.”

The disappointment in his voice mystified the senator. “I agree,” she replied quickly, hoping to soothe his obviously troubled mind.

“Then what were you thinking?” the Knight demanded, blue-green eyes blazing. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Startled, Padmé actually took a step back. “What?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Senator,” Obi-Wan snapped, looking more frustrated and worried then truly furious. It was of little comfort. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he demanded again.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she admitted slowly.

“Oh please,” Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. ‘I’m not blind, Senator. Since finding you both on Tatooine, I saw the way you look at him, the way he responds to you.’ Padmé’s blood ran cold. “I see how comfortable the two of you are with one another, how protective he is of you.”

“Obi-Wan—”

“Tell me the truth, Padmé,” the Jedi interrupted. “What is Anakin to you?”

“Obi-Wan, please, you don’t—”

“What is he to you?”

“My lover.”

The words tumbled out of the senator’s mouth before she could stop them. The room went utterly silent, even the slight hum of the ship seemed to still at the proclamation. As she took

in the Jedi's thunderstruck, horrified face, Padmé found herself blushing, trying not to look away. While to a certain extent there was a certain shame to admitting this, to all that she had done, it was also becoming a matter of pride. Despite having no idea how it happened, she was now in love with the man that had been in Vader's suit, and even though a part of her was ashamed and embarrassed, to see someone else so readily judging her stung her pride. She would defend herself, her actions, and Anakin, because no one else should truly be able to judge another when they had their own actions and sins to worry about.

"You know nothing of the circumstances," she began firmly, but faltered when she saw utmost pity enter the Jedi's eyes.

"Oh Padmé," Obi-Wan whispered. "Did he... did he rape you?"

It was the senator's turn to be taken aback. "W-what?"

"Did he rape you?" Obi-Wan repeated gently. 'Did he somehow use the Jedi mind trick to manipulate you feelings?' Padmé stared at the man blankly. "You can tell me, Padmé, you don't have to be afraid anymore."

Coming back to herself, trying to grasp the situation she had not expected, the senator was finally able to shake her head. "No! No, it wasn't anything like that." When Obi-Wan stared at her doubtfully, she found herself blushing. He was going to make her say it. "Look, Anakin didn't... didn't force anything on me. No tricks. No nothing... In fact it was..." her face burned in humiliated determination, "it was me who initiated the... relationship."

It was truly amazing how Obi-Wan managed to portray more shock now than he had at everything else previous to this moment. Indeed, it might have been comical if Padmé hadn't felt so utterly mortified. The Jedi spent a moment or two working his jaw, trying to get words out that just didn't seem to be there. Again, Padmé tried to keep eye contact, to remain calm, but it was difficult. This was not the sort of conversation she'd wanted to have, but at the same time, it sort of felt a little freeing to finally tell someone about this. She had carried this burden alone for so long, perhaps it would be helpful to speak of it, to have a confidant with her at long last.

Taking a deep breath, knowing that the Jedi wasn't going to come around any time soon, Padmé repeated much stronger and with more confidence, "I'm the one who initiated my relationship with Anakin when he was Darth Vader."

That seemed to finally tear the Force-user out of his shock. "What?!" Obi-Wan cried. "Why? I mean he was—he was Darth Vader for Force sake, Padmé! What, did you think there was really something good in him? Were you under the mistaken impression that you could turn him from the Dark Side with your love?" he scoffed.

That hurt. More than it should have. "No," she spat, furious. 'I was under no false pretenses, Master Jedi,' she sneered. "I'm not a fool. I knew what I was doing. I knew who and what he was. I was using him to get information so I could pass it on to the Alliance."

Being scolded so, Obi-Wan at least had the grace to look ashamed of himself for his rash words, but he also did not appear to want to give up either. "That was incredibly foolish of you, Senator," his voice was less harsh, but still firm. "He could have killed you—"

“You think I didn’t consider that?” Padmé snapped. ‘I’m not a fool,’ she repeated. “I’d thought it out carefully over an entire week. I knew the risks and I thought them acceptable.”

The two stood staring at one another for a moment before Obi-Wan groaned. “Senator,” he sighed. “Despite what you said, that was incredibly foolish. Deals with Darth Vader do not have the best track records.”

“I know,” she mumbled, at last breaking eye contact and looking down at her stomach. She had to fight not to put her hand there, to reassure herself that the little ones were still all right. “But I had to do something.”

“Padmé...” the Jedi sighed again in exasperation before falling silent. “And now you’re in love with him?” he began again.

Walking over to the bed, the young woman decided that she was tired. She hadn’t wanted to fight this war with Obi-Wan, but at the same time, she would finish what had been started. “I know what you’re thinking, Obi-Wan,” she sighed, rubbing her temples. ‘I’ve spent more than one night cursing myself for the way I feel, for what’s now happened between Anakin and me, so you can save your breath. What’s done is done. I... I love Anakin,’ she admitted, her voice soft, but strong. “It took a while, but I eventually saw that there was much more to Darth Vader than just the mighty Sith Lord everyone else sees. When we were alone I saw... he let me see such a... tender man. No, tender’s not exactly the right word...” she fell silent in contemplation.

Quiet enveloped the room as the two occupants withdrew into themselves. When Obi-Wan finally broke the silence with a sigh, Padmé jumped slightly. “He loves you.”

Blinking, the senator turned to stare up at the Jedi. “What?”

The Knight came and sat down beside the senator, staring off ahead, into a world that perhaps only he could see. “He loves you. Anakin, I mean,” he repeated softly.

Warmth spread through Padmé chest at the words before she could stop it, and she couldn’t quite squash the pleasure she took in the declaration. “How do you know?” she muttered, not looking over at her companion. After all, Anakin had never said those words to her.

Obi-Wan snorted, finally forcing the senator to turn towards him. “Anyone with half a brain could see that, Senator,” he shook his head as if still in disbelief. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you when he knows you’re not looking. I’ve seen the way you can get away with touching him, the way he stays close to you, as if worried you’ll leave him.”

The Jedi sighed again, letting his elbows fall to his knees as he leaned forward. “Despite how unrealistic it may seem, how fanciful and childish it sounds, he loves you. You made a Sith Lord fall in love, Senator.” A laugh escaped him. “No easy feat! And it’s more than likely that because of you, he’s here right now. Because of you, we have a chance at righting the galaxy.”

Padmé was not known to be a shy individual, but the praise Obi-Wan was lavishing her with was more than she’d ever expected, or necessarily wanted. A strange sort of embarrassment overcame her, and she wondered at it. “Please,” she mumbled.

“I know what I said to you before,” he went on, “but it seems to have worked out just as I mocked. I have little doubt that it was because of you that Anakin was able to come out from

the Darkness. I've never heard of anyone leaving the Dark Side, but you apparently helped him see the way."

There was nothing she could really say to that, so she said nothing. While a part of her was shying away from the praise, awed and overwhelmed by the implications that it hinted at, the other half was completely pleased. Even though it hadn't started off this way, Padmé realized that if indeed Vader had changed directly because of her, then this was the most important accomplishment in her life. Even more than winning against the Trade Federation, more than anything she'd done while queen and senator combined. If it was indeed solely because of her that Anakin had come out of the Darkness, was going to fulfill the Jedi prophecy to restore balance and destroy the Empire, it meant that had she not thought of the ludicrous idea to sleep with the enemy, the galaxy might never have righted itself. She shivered at remembering how close she had been to abandoning the entire plan. She had almost walked away from not only helping the Rebels, but saving the entire galaxy.

"Please say nothing of this to anyone," Padmé said after several long minutes. "I don't want anyone to know until... later."

Obi-Wan stared at her for a long moment, before finally nodding. "Very well. That is wise... Is there anything else I need to know about you and Anakin?" he asked dryly, cocking an eyebrow.

For just a split second, Padmé toyed with the idea of telling the Jedi about the twins. After all, there was still a large margin of where error could occur, and if Anakin were to fall back into the clutches of the Dark Side, she had little doubt she'd need help protecting the babies. No doubt they would have their father's Force abilities, and Anakin could sense other Force-sensitives...

But she abandoned the idea just as quickly as it occurred. She still felt guilty for not telling Anakin about the pregnancy, how could she turn around and tell someone else before him? It would be more than just betrayal. She knew Anakin still did not completely trust Obi-Wan, or this situation. He would not take the news well should he learn that his lover trusted others with such personal information before him. And there was also the fact that the Jedi might not let her help with the mission to destroy the Emperor if he knew. Or he might even suggest she get rid of them...

"No," she replied in a timely manner, not too quickly, not too slowly. "Nothing."

The Jedi nodded. "Good. Now come. We should probably be there when Anakin wakes."

Padmé followed obediently, wondering if she'd one day be damned for all the lies and half-truths she'd told in her life.

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Fear. He was afraid. Where was he? What happened to him? Why was he alone?

He remembered... he remembered... an explosion. There had been an explosion, and his mother... His mother! Where was his mother?

"You killed her."

No, that was impossible. He loved his mother, he would never, could never kill her. That was a lie.

“You killed her.”

No, no, no, that wasn’t right. That was impossible.

“You killed her.”

Stop. Stop saying that. That wasn’t true. He didn’t kill his mother.

“You killed her. It’s your fault.”

Anger. Why would anyone accuse him of such a thing? He did not kill his mother! That explosion... it had been an accident. Nothing more. He was incapable of killing anyone!

“You killed her. It’s your fault.”

Stop it! It wasn’t true! Why were they torturing him like this? Didn’t they see his pain? Didn’t they see his sorrow? How could they accuse him of such a thing? How could they blame him for an accident? It wasn’t even true... was it?

“You killed her. It’s your fault.”

Rage. Stop it! Stop it!

“You killed her. It’s your fault.”

He was suddenly standing in the middle of a town. Or what had once been a town. There wasn’t much left. Only rubble remained and bodies littering the ground, some crushed under what wreckage of the town. Some were twisted and mangled. Others cut completely in half, limbs littered about. Still others were barely holding together, having been blown apart.

“You killed them. It’s your fault.”

Yes. He killed them. Any why not? They were nothing to him. Mere insects. Petty obstacles that had gotten in his way. Why shouldn’t he kill them? Pathetic creatures.

Two.

His red vision caught sight of two small children, a boy and girl, holding hands, watching him with wide, innocent eyes. So innocent. Like his mother...

“Kill them”

Yes. He wanted to kill them. He was enraged by the fact that they were still alive. Did they not know who he was? Did they not know to be afraid of him? Did they not know that he could kill them?

As he stalked over to the children, they did not move, merely stared at him, unflinching. They were not afraid, and it infuriated him. Why weren’t they afraid?

Raising the lightsaber he hadn’t even known was still in his hands, he swung down at them, easily cutting through their flesh like paper. The two little ones fell to the ground, their fall a slow graceful dance, like tiny feathers on the breeze. And as they fell, he watched, the satisfaction of killing them swelling within his breast, giving him a surge of power.

“You killed them.”

It was a new voice. Turning around, surprised, he saw a young woman standing just behind him, a terrified expression on her face, her brown eyes alight with horror.

“You killed them,” she repeated, tears slowly rolling down her beautiful cheek. “How could you?”

How could he? Why wouldn’t he? Why would she ask such a thing?

“Kill her,” the original voice demanded. “Kill her now.”

As he raised his ’saber, he realized that the woman was gone. Startled, he turned and found her kneeling beside the bodies of the children. She took both up in her arms, now covered in their blood. As she turned to stare up at him, tears still streaming down, a terrifying scowl crossed her lips. “You killed them,” she whispered, voice hoarse. “You murdered them.”

That was enough. The satisfaction from before had swiftly fled, and he no longer wanted to deal with her anymore. His brief hesitation in destroying her didn’t make sense, but it was time he corrected that now. With little effort, he swung his blade once more, and easily slashed through the woman, her remains now tangled and confused with that of the children.

The satisfaction he had expected did not come. Instead, he felt hollow. No. There was... absolutely nothing. It was painful. Agonizing.

Suddenly he was down on the ground, being dragged away. He tried to scream, but couldn’t. Looking down, he saw a black, vine-like chord had wrapped itself around his legs and was pulling him into a black pit. He did not know what would be down in that pit, but he knew it wouldn’t be good, and he was terrified.

His first instinct was to cut through the chord with his lightsaber, but to his horror, it was no longer in his hands. He tried to claw at the ground, tried to get away, but the more he struggled, the easier his captor seemed to pull him in. He could not scream. He could not get way.

A bright light above him, caused him to flinch. As he looked up, he saw a young man with stormy eyes glaring down at him. He fought as hard as he could, until finally he found his voice. “Help me!”

The other man’s firm expression became harsh and judgmental. “Why should I help you? You did not help others.”

“Help me!” he pleaded, pain shooting through his body the closer he got to the pit.

“You killed them,” the man indicated to the mangled corpses of the woman and children. “If you could kill them, there is nothing left in you to save.”

“No! Please! Help me!” he begged. He could feel tears streaming from his eyes. “Please! I don’t want to die!” For that’s surely where the vine was taking him: to his death.

The young man’s face did not waver, and slowly, the light began to fade as the man walked away from him. Another shot of pure terror surged through him.



“No! Wait! Please! Help me! Help me!” Sickening laughter erupted from the pit, and he could see burning, putrid yellow eyes glaring at him from within. “Help me! Please!”

The laughing intensified, and sharp, needle precise pain entered every vulnerable point in his body. His screams only seemed to exacerbate the demon’s delight.

As if woken from their forced slumber, rattled awake by the incessant laughter, the corpses of the fallen around the ruined city slowly stood up, walking towards him as he was still being dragged to the pit. There wasn’t much left of many of them, but what could come forward, accusation and hate buzzing in the air. Their low moans were occasionally broken by ear shattering screams that pierced the air, mingling sickly with the laughter.

“You killed them,” a gravelly voice from within the pit sneered. “And now you. are. mine!”

“NO!”

But it was too late. A clawed hand reached out and latched on to him, quickly pulling him the rest of the way in. But not before he saw the young man still glaring in disgust at him from a distance, while the mutilated woman cradled the remains of the children to her breast, weeping.

“NO!”

Anakin shot up gasping for breath, groping out with his hands, as though to try and stop himself from being moved or pulled. He couldn’t see. Everything was a mess of blurred color. Why couldn’t he see? Another surge of panic shot through his veins.

As he tried to figure out what was going on, he was vaguely aware that there was a voice speaking to him. The tones were cool, but not necessarily calming. They did nothing to cut through his fear, and likewise, did nothing as he swung his legs over the table he was laying on. He did not know why he was laying down to begin with on this table. The smell of the room was metallic and stank of disinfectants, but while he comprehended this on some level, it did nothing to soothe his fright.

There was nothing going through Anakin’s mind at that moment except survival. All of his instincts came screaming to life, and he knew of nothing except his intense need to live. The waking world was confused with the nightmare he had come out of, and he wasn’t sure which was which. A part of him wondered if he was dead.

Without a second thought, Anakin pushed himself off the table and stumbled away. The voices followed him, their tones still cool, but he ignored them. He tried to make out what things were, his vision still greatly impaired, but it was difficult. Everything seemed to be a grey-white color. It took him a moment to find a way out, groping stupidly as it had not occurred to him to use the Force.

Bursting through the door, he expected something to happen, but nothing did. His vision was still distorted and the colors did not change very much. He stumbled and half jogged about, the Force guiding him, even though he still did not remember he could use it. Nothing made sense in his troubled mind, and the screams and moans from his nightmare still plagued him, the laughing ringing in his ears.

Eventually, he found his way somewhere dark, and he rushed towards it eagerly. A part of him was frightened of it, remembering the pit, but then he felt so exposed in the blurry, bright world he was in currently. The darkness was familiar, but was it safe? As he thought this, he paused momentarily.

He was confused. He was afraid to stay out in the open, in the light, yet the darkness terrified him. Shaking his head, Anakin tried to force his vision to clear. It wasn't working well. Sound, however, was beginning to improve, and he could make out distinct noises. The loudest being the slight sound of scrapping claws on the metal floors, coming towards him.

Instinctively, he reached out for his lightsaber, only to panic when he didn't feel it. Thankfully, his vision was beginning to clear, and with it the memories of what had happened to him. A ship. He was on a ship. But what was the sound? What kind of ship...?

"Awake, I see that you are," an old, strange voice spoke to him. It sounded familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. "Strange, I find it, that you are up."

The creature was Force-sensitive, Anakin could feel it, and willing himself not to be at a disadvantage, slowly, he forced his vision to clear, until he found himself staring into suspicious green eyes in the face of a tiny creature. He remembered who this was.

"Master Yoda," it came out more like a sneer.

The Jedi Grand Master frowned. "Troubled you are. Why?"

Being vulnerable in anything always upset Anakin, to say the least. Weaknesses in general were something he avoided at all cost, and to have this creature stand there, antagonizing him like this... it was too much. Rage boiled just below the surface, and it took every ounce of control the former Sith possessed not to lash out at that moment and destroy his long time enemy.

"I should've finished you off when I had the chance," he growled.

The Jedi Grand Master did not seem the least bit surprised at the threatening words, or the revelation. Instead, the creature nodded in agreement. "You should have. Come," he gestured with his walking stick. Anakin glared at him suspiciously. "Much to discuss we have, Lord Vader."

Likewise, showing no surprise, Anakin continued to glare, silently weighing his options. He didn't have too many, at least not if he wanted his plans in the future to work. So, tempering his rage, the young man finally nodded, and led to where the Jedi indicated. Phantoms from his nightmare still haunted him, but it wasn't the first time something like this had happened, and he didn't let it get to him. So, instead, warily he followed the small creature, just waiting for the smallest excuse to destroy the being once and for all.

## 49. Acceptance

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There was a sickening moment as Padmé was walked with Obi-Wan back towards Anakin's room when she knew something was wrong. Stopping dead in her tracks, the senator exchanged looks with the Jedi, and together, the two ran as fast as they could to the room they had left the former Sith. When they got there, they were horrified to see that Anakin was nowhere in sight.

"Where's Anakin?" the Knight demanded of the medical droid that hovered near.

"Master Anakin awoke early from his anesthesia," it replied calmly. "I could not stop him. He should not have woken for another two hours."

"Kriff," Padmé swore under her breath, ignoring Obi-Wan's sharp look at her. "Do you know where he went? What direction?" she asked the droid instead.

"He went in the direction of the recreation center," the droid replied neutrally. "He should be brought back for further monitoring. He was not authorized to leave."

"We'll find him," the Jedi nodded before turning towards door and rushing out.

As they went on in their search, Padmé had the growing sensation that something was terribly wrong. The fear and panic that she had thought she could sense was slowly melting away. What it was being replaced with was not very encouraging. Anakin was angry. Furious. And it was only growing stronger.

Turning the corner, following the sense of nearly overwhelming rage, the two found themselves in a lounge right above a docking bay that had been converted into a sparing ring. The ring was to practice hand-to-hand combat, blaster accuracy, and other such physical activities. But that didn't hold much interest for the senator at the moment. Instead, she focused all her attention on the two beings sitting together in the lounge. She was just in time to watch as Anakin's jaw twitched, his lip curling up in a telling snarl, and a hand slowly being raised, as likewise, Master Yoda began raising his own hands.

While she had no idea how she was able to move as fast as she did, Padmé was grateful, and ended up throwing herself in between Anakin and Master Yoda, Obi-Wan doing the same. "Wait!" the young Jedi cried. "Wait, what's going on here?"

Anakin growled out several harsh sounding words that were not Basic, his hands trembling in rage. Master Yoda looked little better. His green eyes were narrowed into slits, and the usually serene expression that he was known for was nowhere to be seen. But unlike his Sith counterpart, the Jedi Master did not curse, merely turned an accusing, furious glare towards the younger man.

"Lied." The word hung heavily in the air, seeming to hit Obi-Wan squarely as his shoulders hunched ever so slightly. 'Lied to me you did, Obi-Wan,' the Grand Master accused. "Great danger you have brought unto us all."

Obi-Wan stiffened, but he did not back down. "Master, let me explain—"

“No,” the old master growled. “No. Deceived me you did. Deceived everyone. In grave danger, you have put us in.”

“It’s not like that, Master,” the younger Jedi tried again. “We only did what we had to. Master, Anakin is the Chosen O—”

“No,” Yoda snapped, there being so much anger in his voice, it took Padmé aback along with Obi-Wan. “Speak not such blasphemies.”

“It’s not blasphemy, Master,” Obi-Wan replied as calmly as anyone could in such a situation. “I know what you must think of this, but you’re wrong. Anakin—”

“Vader,” the Grand Master corrected furiously. “Betray us all, he will. Tricked you, he has.”

Anakin tried to push Padmé out of the way to get at the small green creature, but both she and Obi-Wan fought to stay in his path. “Anakin wouldn’t do that!” the senator snapped, becoming angry for her lover’s sake.

“And you, Senator, lied as well.” While still angry, Yoda also appeared to be growing tired.

“I never lied,” Padmé defended, keeping her chin up in defiance. “Not one thing I said was a lie. It’s not my fault you mistook my meaning.”

“Dangerous he is,” the ancient being pointed his cane at Anakin, stressing again that one key fact. “Foolish you have both been.”

“From my point of view, you’re the one who’s being foolish,” she glared. “You’re not even listening to what we have to say. You’re just judging the situation before you even know anything about it. Before you know anything about what we’ve all been through.”

Silence enveloped around the four occupants of the room. Anakin, Padmé noticed, was standing very close behind her, as if ready at any moment to push her behind him, to protect her. Now that Obi-Wan had pointed it out, she could feel this startling, fierce desire to shield her, to keep her safe. Sith Lords would not desire such a thing for anyone. It gave Padmé hope.

It was also encouraging to see that Anakin had also waited throughout this confrontation. Patience was not his strongest virtue, so the fact that he’d stood by while they’d talked rather than just slicing the old master in half, or some other equally horrible thing, was showing signs of progress. If only Master Yoda could see how far he’d come in such a short time!

At last, the silence was broken by a sigh. Staring down at Master Yoda, the three younger beings waited for his proclamation. “Speak what you have to say, you will,” the Grand Master declared, meeting Obi-Wan’s eyes. “But alone.”

Another jolt filled their air as once more Anakin’s patience snapped just a little bit more. But Padmé could understand Yoda’s reasoning. So, hoping to diffuse the situation, she grabbed the former Sith’s arm and tugged on it lightly. “Come on,” she murmured. “Come with me.”

Anakin didn’t budge. Instead, he stood firmly rooted in place, glaring down hatefully at Yoda. The air crackled with a strange, almost electric charge. Pulling harder, the senator

almost begged. “Anakin.”

Dark eyes turned themselves upon Padmé face for the first time since entering the room. Slowly, almost painfully, the tension peeled away, and blue eyes fought to make themselves known. The former Sith took a deep breath, but did not release it. Instead, he nodded his head, and began moving towards the door, the senator hot on his heels. Glancing back, Padmé saw a still angry, yet thoughtful look on Master Yoda’s face, while Obi-Wan appeared a little more confident.

Anakin’s strides were long and almost impossible to match, forcing Padmé to jog to keep up. His agitation was clear, but now that they were away from Master Yoda, the senator found she wasn’t quite sure what he was agitated about. Certainly Yoda, but there was something else troubling him. She wished once more that she could read minds as he could. Perhaps she would have made more progress with him by now. But there was no use in wishing for something that couldn’t be. That’s what Anakin would say, she was sure of it.

“Wait,” she called.

Almost instantly, the big man stopped dead in his tracks, turning around as if surprised she was still with him. Had he been trying to get away from her? Or maybe he’d simply forgotten that she’d been there?

There were curious ears all around the base, and Padmé saw more than one pair of eyes turn in their direction. It was understandable, seeing a senator thought dead here with a strange, beat-up looking outsider. But however understandable it was, it didn’t make her feel better. They had to get out from under the public’s eye.

“Come with me,” she murmured, taking his flesh hand and leading him back towards her room. At least in there it would be private. Anything he might say or do would not shock the entire ship.

The trek there was silent, but because of who she was leading, it didn’t surprise Padmé. It was hard to keep her composure when she was feeling so many things, and sensing Anakin’s inner turmoil wasn’t helping matters. But thankfully her political training allowed her to appear impassive as they walked through the ship. And it was only when they had made it to her quarters and the doors had closed that she allowed herself a sigh.

Leaning back against the door, she watched as Anakin continued to stride about the room, a frightful scowl still on his lips while his hands were firmly clasped behind his back. His movements were sharp, almost frantic. She longed to know what Master Yoda had said to him, if indeed any words had been able to come without sudden threats, but she supposed she’d have to wait to find out... if she ever did. Communication was something else they were going to have to work on with this young man.

After letting him use up a little more energy, Padmé pushed herself off the door and asked gently, “What happened?”

Blazing eyes turned upon her, and she saw barely concealed fury. “This won’t work,” he spat, resuming his pacing. “From the very beginning I knew this would never work and yet I allowed you and that moronic Jedi to talk me into coming here!”

He was regretting his decision to come here. That wasn't exactly a surprise, but the senator knew she was going to have to think fast if she was going to save what she and Obi-Wan had planned so meticulously. "Sometimes it's better to take chances, even if you think you may fail. The results can still surprise you."

"I should have insisted on going somewhere else. Anywhere but this Force-forsaken Rebel scrap pile," he snarled.

She wasn't getting through to him. Comfort was not something Anakin was used to dealing with, Padmé realized. Comfort was insulting to Sith Lords, and even though he was no longer a Sith, that mentality wasn't that far behind him yet. If she were to get responses from him, and hopefully results, she would have to be a little more provocative. She had to catch his notice and make him think.

After allowing him a few turns in his mad pacing, Padmé asked carefully, "So, you wish to leave?" Anakin didn't respond, but she knew the answer. 'Pity,' she went on. "I had no idea that you could be run off so easily."

That stopped him cold. "What?" he hissed, spinning on her.

Keeping her face neutral, Padmé shrugged one shoulder slightly. "I just think it's a pity that Master Yoda can run you off like this. But then, it's probably for the best that he get his way. He is used to getting his way and is quite powerful."

"And I'm not?" Anakin bellowed. Padmé hoped no one outside could hear them. "I can kill that insignificant little worm at any moment if I so choose. I could have killed him on Naboo."

That was something the senator had not heard, and even though it didn't surprise her, it was chilling. Master Yoda had been considered the most powerful Force being in the galaxy to date. His midichlorian had been the highest in history. But then, no one had known Anakin or his existence before Vader. And by the time he had established himself, he'd already destroyed the Jedi Order, so no one doubted his power or asked for tests, for obvious reasons. But with all he was capable of, it made sense that he could stand with or even above the old Jedi Master.

"But you didn't," she went on, working to keep herself calm, even as she was beginning to believe that she'd made a miscalculation in provoking him like this. 'Anakin,' she sighed. "You could have killed him on Naboo. You probably could have killed him now. But you didn't," she stressed. "What happened between the two of you just now? He's upset you. Let me help you."

For a moment, Padmé didn't think he would say anything. His anger was cooling, she could feel it, but he was still agitated. Something was really bothering him, so much so that he couldn't hide it from her. That was not a good sign. There was something bothering him that went beyond his confrontation with Master Yoda. It was just a hunch, but as a senator, Padmé had learned to listen to these kinds of hunches.

"Anakin," she walked over to him, gently touching his arm, forcing him to look at her. "What's wrong? I want to help you."

Cold blue eyes captured her in their intense gaze, and within, Padmé could see a myriad of extreme emotions swirling just behind his thin shield. There was so much pain in that look, so much anger and fear. Without realizing it, she moved in closer to him, pressing their bodies together. Almost immediately, his real hand was in her hair, running his fingers through it. Her eyes slid shut, a sigh escaping her.

She didn't remember who exactly initiated the kiss, but she didn't exactly care. Suddenly she felt his lips on hers. It was not gentle, not like the last time they'd kissed on Tatooine. This time it was hungry, greedy, and all consuming. Suddenly, she was on fire. In this kiss, she could feel everything, Anakin's pain, anger, sorrow, want, desire, fear. It hurt, but she gladly flung herself into the flames, wanting to ease his suffering, wanting more for her own needs.

They ended up on the bed, Anakin viciously attacking her neck, leaving the young woman gasping and squirming underneath him. He was completely overwhelming, but she allowed herself to be taken away. She knew he felt powerless here, knew he feared not being in control. So she let him control her. She gave him the power over herself because it was what he needed. It was what she needed. He wanted control, she wanted to let go.

Instead of the warm passionate love they had made before going to Naboo or the other times they had when he had been Vader, this time, everything was frantic. Their touches were desperate, their needs urgent. It had been so long and so much had happened between them. There had been so much tension building up between them without either even truly realizing it. Something needed to give or they would both snap. Both instinctively knew this.

Anakin entered her while both were still nearly completely dressed. Padmé gasped, hissing slightly in pain, but it didn't hurt too long, and the moment he was in her, she groaned in pleasure, all pain forgotten. He wasted no time either. Again, he set to work, overpowering her senses. His mouth was on her neck, hand in her hair, while the rest of his bulk was slamming into her, not holding back. Her hands were scratching and massaging his back, marveling at the taut muscles she felt under her touch, even as she bit into his shoulder to muffle her groans, adoring the growls he emitted.

It all happened so quickly, their intimacy spontaneous, but greatly satisfying for both parties. Padmé came with a cry, her body quivering with satisfaction. And then it happened again, and again. While she was not necessarily naïve, Padmé hadn't thought it very likely she would ever feel the rolling effects of an orgasm from anyone. But she was now. And even when Anakin finally came, her body was still experiencing the delicious sensations. It was almost terrifying how glorious he could make her feel.

By the time they had both come down from their high, both were sweating, panting, and shaking. Anakin rolled off of her, a groan escaping his lips, as he laid flat on his back. It took a few moments before Padmé found the energy to roll over, but when she did, she cuddled into his side. His arm immediately shifted to wrap around her. Together they both just laid still, Padmé with her hand on Anakin's chest, Anakin's grip tightening around her gently.

Padmé felt her eyes getting heavy, and she peered up at Anakin. His eyes were already closed. This was the most relaxed she had ever seen him, she realized. Even when unconscious on Tatooine he'd looked stressed and severe. Now his face was smooth and

neutral. The agitation had left him for the time being, and she hoped fervently that it would not return.

A sudden ache in her heart caused senator to frown. This man beside her, her lover, this was not Darth Vader. This was Anakin. This was the father of her children. This was the man that could love her and love them. This was the man she stood to lose if they did not help him free himself from the Darkness. Even though she hated the thought, there was still a very good chance that she would lose him. Forever.

Clear blue eyes were suddenly upon her, staring intently. She was frozen in place. “What are you hiding from me?”

The question took the senator by surprise, especially in her exhausted state. But she had anticipated something like this. She knew Anakin was too observant to have not noticed something was different about her. He might not know about children or relationships in general, but he was an observant sort of man. It was how he had accomplished so much in such a short time.

“I... I can’t tell you,” the words tumbled out of her mouth, hanging in the air lamely.

The calm blues hardened immediately. “Why not?”

“I just... Anakin,” she sighed. ‘We have so much we need to accomplish very soon. By the end of the week, the Emperor will hopefully be gone,’ she began carefully. “Don’t you think you have enough on your plate to worry about right now?”

“No.”

Padmé sighed again. “I don’t want anything to distract you from your—our—plans. I don’t want to ruin our good luck by dumping anything unnecessary on you at the moment.”

“You actually believe in luck?” Anakin sneered, beginning to sit up.

The senator wished they hadn’t gotten started talking at all. She should have pretended to be asleep. “I do,” she confirmed.

“That’s nonsense.”

“So is worrying about something that doesn’t concern you right now,” she fired back automatically.

It was a lie of course, but again, she couldn’t help the doubts that plagued her when she looked at this man. In a week’s time Palpatine would surely be dead, but would there be an Emperor Vader in his place? How could she live with herself if this were to come to pass and he knew of his offspring? Surely Darth Vader would either have them killed in fear that they may one day usurp him, or he would take them from her and be twisted into Sith like their father.

“I’ll tell you as soon as our mission is over,” she promised, turning pleading eyes upon him. “Please. Just... leave it alone.”

They stared at one another a long moment before Anakin turned his head away with a sigh, sliding back down. He was staring up at the ceiling, not saying a word. He was troubled by something other than Master Yoda, other than Padmé’s refusal to tell him her secret. She was



thankful he had dropped the subject for the time being, yet she was still not satisfied. Unable to stop herself, her own curiosity getting the better of her, the young woman asked once more, "What's wrong?"

"I'll tell you as soon as our mission is over," he replied drily.

Knowing she'd pushed too hard, knowing she would get nothing else from him, the senator laid back down herself, nuzzling into her lover, arm draped over his chest fighting to contain her sigh. What a lovely couple they made. They couldn't even talk to each other without being either suspicious of the other, or simply not trusting the other. The odds were stacked against them, the future looked bleak, but Padmé couldn't give up hope. Not when there was so much riding on their success, the least of which not being saving Anakin's soul.

Tears welled up in her eyes at the thought of their failure, at the real possibility of Darth Vader reemerging into the world as a fully recovered terror. Padmé hugged Anakin closer to her. "Promise me that you'll come back to me after the battle."

She felt rather than saw Anakin's head turn towards her. "What?"

"Just... promise me," she hugged him closer, feeling him tighten his grip around her as well. "Promise you'll come back."

He was confused, she knew that, but she didn't dare say anymore. Eventually, she heard him exhale deeply before he leaned over and planted a kiss on her head. It made her smile a bit. "I promise."

Only time would tell if he lived up to his word.

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After listening to Master Yoda rant and rave about how reckless and stupid he'd been for bringing Darth Vader to the Rebel Base, Obi-Wan was about ready to throw his hands in the air and just walk away from it all. But he knew he couldn't do that. He had a responsibility to not only Anakin, but to the galaxy. A lot was riding on him helping the former Sith step into the Light. Even though no one knew it, the galaxy was depending on him.

When the former Grand Master of the Jedi Order had finished, Obi-Wan decided it was safe to speak. "I understand your point of view, Master," he acquiesced gracefully. "But now I believe it is only right you listen to mine."

"Hmm," was all the answer he received.

"I told you all that is important already," Obi-Wan began steadily. "Anakin is the Chosen One. I was led by the Force to him. I admit it has been difficult to begin integrating him into the Light, but he's come so far already, Master," the Knight defended passionately.

"He was already well on his way to redemption when I first met him without the mask. He was already going by the name of Anakin. Do you honestly think that if he weren't changing he would have been able to restrain himself this far? He would have killed you and destroyed the entire ship if he wanted to if he were truly Darth Vader. He's not. We have a plan together, he's listened to my instructions, he's been meditating, and he's shown remarkable restraint even when coming into former enemy territory."

The two remaining Jedi stared at one another for a long moment, eyes locked in silent combat, each willing the other to understand, to back down. Green eyes met stormy blue grey, the Force swirling around them, clashing as they stared. As a student, Obi-Wan had always been intimidated by the Grand Master, and who wouldn't have been? Next to Yoda, everyone else looked uneducated and completely dim in the Light. But now here he was, over thirty years later, and he was challenging the aged Master openly. Truly these were the end times.

Becoming uncomfortable, Obi-Wan decided he had to make one last final plea of understanding. "Master, Anakin is the Chosen One. I will do what I must, even if you do not approve, but he will be trained. It is the will of the Force."

A heavy sigh escaped Yoda, and he suddenly deflated, looking very old and worn. "Jedi against Jedi... never supposed to be this way, the galaxy was. Thought such a thing impossible was in my life time, I did."

Compassion surged through the young man instantly. He felt terrible for bringing such a burden upon the old Jedi, but then, it could not be helped. This was just the world they were living in now. They didn't like it, might never get completely used to it, but that was just how it was.

"It is dangerous to live in the past," Qui-Gon had said once. "Memories are not always the most reliable tools. In them, there seems to be a golden haze around even at the worst times. You must look to the here and now, be mindful of what you do in the moment, or else the future you have looked to might never come to pass."

Qui-Gon was, of course, right. It was a little surprising that the Grand Master, the Jedi above Jedi, was stuck in the past, even after the many centuries he'd taught of such dangers. But it was understandable. Even the Great Master Yoda had gotten stuck in his ways, and was finding it hard to cope after the destruction of the Order. Obi-Wan, too, had allowed himself to mourn and become bitter for a time after Order Sixty-Six. But in the end, he couldn't hold on to such feelings. He'd had to move on, lest he be destroyed. Maybe it was time to remind his Master of that lesson as well.

"All things change," the young Knight said quietly. "Not even a Jedi can contain the will of the Force. I like to believe that all things happen for a reason."

"What reason was there, that so many should die?" Yoda turned away bitter.

Surprised by such doubt and acrimony, the young man took a deep breath and released it, remembering Qui-Gon's words. "Everything was changing before the rule of the Sith, Master. The Jedi had become... stagnant." The small green Jedi narrowed his eyes critically. "It's true," Obi-Wan insisted. "We have changed little since the beginning. That which does not change weakens and slowly becomes extinct. It is a rule of the galaxy. Adaptation is important to any being's life cycle, their culture. We hardly changed, and it nearly destroyed us all.

"There is hope though, Master," he went on. "We have found the Chosen One. We can learn just as much from him as he from us. Because of our arrogance, our blindness and assuredness that nothing could ever happen to us, we were nearly all wiped out. Change was coming and we did not bend enough to compensate for it or ourselves. Anakin... he is

flexible, Master. He understands the galaxy and those that live in it. At least in many respects. There is so much he has to learn, but we can learn from him too.”

Yoda looked troubled as he stared out in front of him, pondering all that had been told to him. It was difficult to say if the young man had gotten through to the old creature, but Obi-Wan held his ground. Either he would gain the support of a powerful ally or be forced to continue in his task alone hoping there would be no conflicts. He would do what was necessary, but that didn’t stop the young man from wishing he wouldn’t have to break connections with one of the last of his kind.

At last, Yoda sighed once more, and looked over into the younger Jedi’s eyes. “Wisdom you have spoken. Shows greatness of mind.”

Smiling a bit shyly, Obi-Wan had to fight with himself not to shrug. “Well... I only saw the way because I had some help too.”

The old Master gave a snort at that. “Qui-Gon, still comes to you, he does? Believe everything he says, I would not,” he warned.

Even though it was probably not appropriate, Obi-Wan laughed. “That’s probably exactly the reason he comes to me and not you, Master.”

Yoda snorted again. “Reckless he was. Reckless, even in death, he still is.”

“And it’s probably because of that recklessness that he’s figured out a way to come back, to help us as we struggle now,” Obi-Wan fired back, still smiling. “Try to understand, Master. Isn’t that what the Jedi are supposed to do? To understand? To be open-minded? The best first step I can see is for you to trust me and believe me when I say Anakin is the key to the future.”

There was hesitation in the old Jedi’s eyes. “Doubt, I sense in you,” he said at last. “Afraid of him, you are.”

“I admit that,” Obi-Wan nodded. “But I will not let my fear rule over me. I promised him, as well as myself, that I would train him, that I would stand beside him. And I will. I am his master now and I won’t forsake him.”

They held one another’s gaze again, before Yoda looked away first. “A plan you said you have. Tell me.”

It took everything within Obi-Wan not to sag in relief. He had done it. He knew his Master was crumbling. And so, without hesitation, he informed the old creature of Anakin’s plan to kill the Emperor. He told him about the distractions needed, about the how he had people already on the inside, the loyalty of the Storm Troopers, and everything else. It was important to be truthful now, as it would only be damaging to lie or willfully mislead the Grand Master again.

When Obi-Wan had finished, the green Jedi was frowning disapprovingly. “A Sith’s plan, it is.”

“It’s a better than anything we’ve come up with so far,” Obi-Wan did shrug this time. “And it has the best probability of succeeding than anything you or I could have come up with.”

“Dangerous chance, it is.”

“True, but we need him, Master. Not just as the Chosen One. The Rebels can’t possibly hope to destroy the Empire without help from the inside. We have that now,” the Knight urged. “We actually have a great advantage, even if it is risky. I say we give it a try.”

“And if Vader should return?” Yoda asked skeptically. “What then? Replace one Emperor with another we will have.”

“If Anakin were to turn back,” Obi-Wan began carefully, “it wouldn’t really matter. He came up with this plan to begin with. He would have implemented it with or without our help. And he would have eventually succeeded. It would be no different in that case. At least now there is a chance that we can win.”

Shaking his head, Yoda jumped down from his perch and began walking out into the hall. “Help you I will, but understand, a fool’s mission you are undertaking, Obi-Wan. A fool you are.”

“Perhaps,” Obi-Wan consented with a smirk. “But who’s really the fool? The fool or the fool who follows him?”

Yoda turned to him sharply, sending a glare his way, but the younger Jedi chose not to notice. He was in too good of mood to let the Grand Master get him down. After all, it was not every day that someone out-thought the Master Yoda, and forced him to listen to their logic. It was probably one of the most significant achievements he’d ever made.

Now all he had to do was fulfill what he’d said he would do and keep Anakin from returning to the Dark Side. Taking a deep breath, Obi-Wan knew that that would be easier said than done.

Maybe I can get Padmé to help, he thought. After all, she was the reason for all of this to begin with. Abruptly Obi-Wan realized he hadn’t shared that piece of information with Master Yoda, but decided it was better that way. The old Jedi might not have agreed had he known that the Chosen One had already formed a very strong attachment and was clearly following none of the old Jedi Codes.

Life is getting a little too complicated, he thought as he and the other Jedi went their separate ways for the evening. After this, I think I’ll retire.

It was fanciful thinking only, but it did sound a lot nicer than going through other such missions again. He just hoped he’d have a chance to seriously think about it later on in life.

## 50. Preparations

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Obi-Wan was getting frustrated. Not that it was particularly hard to make him so, but at the moment, the young Knight believed that his new apprentice was an expert at pushing all of his buttons in all of the wrong ways. While he had vastly improved since their first meeting, Anakin was still very... disobliged to be helpful—to put it mildly. It didn't seem to matter what Obi-Wan was talking about, what he was trying to teach, the former Sith questioned him and struggled at every turn, even at the simplest requests.

Watching the younger man now, standing not too far off, practicing his 'saber movements with his new arm since they'd failed in meditation, Obi-Wan wondered how he ever thought that this could possibly work out. Sure, he'd been confident when facing Yoda, getting a strange bravado in the face of adversary, but when faced with the source of the disagreement itself... the Jedi was a little more hesitant to be confident. As Master Yoda had said himself, Obi-Wan was afraid. And with very good reason.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, the Knight decided that perhaps a different angle was needed. "Anakin," he called, gratified—at least—that his stubborn apprentice was gracious enough to look his way at the sound of his name. "Come here. I think we need to start this lesson again."

The younger man scowled, but obediently walked over. "I hate this thing," he spat, throwing the lightsaber at Obi-Wan. Thankfully it was not activated.

Catching it easily, the Jedi almost sighed. "It's just for practice," he tried once again to explain the concept to his impatient student.

"Why I can't I use my own lightsaber?" Anakin demanded once more.

"We went through this before, Anakin," Obi-Wan had to fight hard not to lose his own temper. 'For one, your 'saber would draw suspicion.' The former Sith growled. "Two, it's easier to use practice lightsabers to prevent serious accidents."

"You just don't trust me," the younger man spat. "You think I'm going to try and kill you."

"Well it's not like you've give me very much confidence," the older man snapped, regretting his words instantly.

Taking a moment to calm himself and collect his thoughts, Obi-Wan sighed as he began again. "I'm not as much worried about you killing me on purpose as I am by accident," he explained carefully. "You're very powerful, Anakin, and there are times I don't think you realize just how strong, physically, you are. In case there's an accident of any kind, it's just better to have this practice 'sabers at first. To protect us both. Do you understand?"

In typical fashion, Anakin did not answer. Another sigh escaped Obi-Wan. Of all the beings in the galaxy, of all the trillions, it had to be the most stubborn, inflexible man who just so happened to formerly have been known as Darth Vader. The Force had a wicked sense

of humor. And of course, his old master Qui-Gon was probably enjoying every moment of these sick twists and ironies.

“Let’s try our meditations again,” the Jedi instructed, this time taking out his own practice ’saber as he handed his apprentice’s back to him, ignoring the questioning look he received. “You seem to respond best when in action. You learn and apply by doing, not by studying. Let’s meditate with motion.”

Taking up an easy posture, the Knight waited patiently for the other to mimic his stance. When he was certain Anakin was ready, Obi-Wan spoke. “We will move slowly. This is not an exercise of the body, but one of the mind. Think, don’t feel. Use your instincts to block my blows, but keep your mind open to the Living Force. Concentrate on what keeps you calm. Find your center. No hot passions. Now, let’s begin.”

Almost painstakingly slow, Obi-Wan made the first move. At first, Anakin rushed to block, but seemed to at least remember the point of the exercise and waited for his master to make the next move. Slowly, the Knight moved again, watching as the other had to restrain himself from quickly moving to once again block. The deliberate movements were already helping Obi-Wan to relax, and so when he spoke, it was much soother. “Remember the point, Anakin. Find your center. Be at peace.”

And after several more moves, Anakin finally seemed to let go. His movements slowed to match Obi-Wan’s, and his style became a little less aggressive and sharp. Again and again they moved together, blocking, striking at one another with measured movement. Time seemed to stand still for them, so focused were they on what they were doing. Everything else faded into the background. Everything else was inconsequential. All that mattered was the other man across from them, watching his movements and defending themselves. Yet even that was not their main priority. From deep within them, they were finding their center, their peace.

Coming out of his meditation, Obi-Wan was surprised to find that not only had their duel become a frantic flurry of light as their ’sabers clashed into each other, both of them naturally having picked up their speed, but he could also sense Anakin. For the first time since meeting him, Obi-Wan felt real... calm from the younger man. He was not fighting out of aggression or anger right now. For the first time perhaps in the boy’s life, he was purely within the moment, in the Light, as he let it control his actions while he searched within himself for the peace that had been denied to him for so many years.

All around the make-shift combat training room, spectators had gathered to watch the two Force-users in their duel. To them, it was a beautiful, but deadly display of elegant warfare. The two combatants were moving almost too fast for others to see their hands, and it amazed Obi-Wan that they had both seemed to slip into such furious movement without either truly seeming to be aware of it. Because they knew the style and the movements, they were moving completely in tandem, in sync, as though they had been doing it together this way all their lives.

The inner peace that Anakin had achieved, however, did not last. Almost as soon as he had obtained the required calm and Obi-Wan sensed it, something went wrong. It was not dissimilar to watching a wheel of a cart suddenly spinning too fast and wobbling furiously before it broke and the entire wagon went down with it.

The careful balance that had been obtained somewhere in their mock-battle, the elegance of their movements suddenly became sharp and sporadic once more. The boy was losing control. A spike in fear told the Jedi that his apprentice was coming out of his meditation and did not like what was happening. Learned instincts were coming back online, and in an attempt to self-preserve, Anakin would soon become aggressive, dominating, as he had thus far in all that they did. If they did not stop now and Obi-Wan did not find a way to calm the boy, they might very well have a dangerous situation at hand, especially with all of the people around who had come to watch.

Slowing his movements, while not allowing a hit to be placed upon him, Obi-Wan tried to project an air of tranquility to his apprentice. It wouldn't really work on Anakin, the boy's mind not being one that could be influenced like that, but hopefully he would understand the attempt and begin to remember that this was practice. Hopefully he would remember that this was not a real battle.

As Anakin began heaving for breath, his panic starting to become too much, the Jedi Knight knew he was going to have to break away. Now. From the limited past experience he had with the boy, he knew that angrier, more dangerous moves were going to present themselves. This had to stop before Darth Vader made his presence known to the galaxy once more.

So, doing his best to flip and twist away, Obi-Wan was soon several feet away from the former Sith, standing calmly. He watched as Anakin began to charge towards him, but the Jedi merely held up his hand. "Enough, Anakin," he commanded, hoping that it would really be enough to stop the other, even as he readied to block another blow.

The use of his true name caused the bigger man to slow, and soon he came to a stop before his master. The two men heaved for breath, both covered in sweat from head to toe, and they stood eyeing each other critically. Weakness was not something that either wanted to display before the other, and despite being exhausted mentally and physically, Obi-Wan stood his ground. One had to with a man like Anakin.

Slowly, lowering his 'saber and switching it off, the Jedi Knight bowed low to his apprentice. Although it took a moment, Anakin, bowed too. "Well done, my young apprentice," Obi-Wan praised, hoping to further diffuse the tension and negative feelings that had, in the end, permeated the air.

Finally switching off his own lightsaber, Anakin did not meet his master's eyes. "I failed in the exercise."

"Not at all," the Knight was surprised by the blunt words. "You did quite—"

"Wasn't the point of your exercise to remain calm in a battle situation?" the other cut in, blue eyes blazing, freezing Obi-Wan in place with their angry intensity.

"You did—!"

"I failed to maintain it," Anakin spat contemptuously. It was only then that Obi-Wan realized that the anger he heard was not directed at him. The former Sith was not angry with his master, not really. He was angry with himself.

He's angry with himself...

“Anakin,” the Jedi began carefully, consciously keeping his hands by his sides to appear neither threatening nor overly friendly, “I did not expect you to perfect this in one lesson. It takes time.”

“I should be able to do it,” the younger man snarled, turning away. “To accept anything less than perfection is unacceptable.”

“This is a lesson that young Jedi have always struggled with,” Obi-Wan replied carefully. “Life is not about perfection, Anakin, it is taking the imperfect and making it the best you can. Without imperfections there is no opportunity for growth.”

“Then you Jedi are weak,” the former Sith snapped, eyes darkening menacingly.

He’s not used to this sort of training, Obi-Wan reminded himself. He only understands harsh punishment. Anything less than perfect is disgraceful.

“We must go again.”

The Knight stared up at his apprentice, fighting to keep the incredibility from his face. Obi-Wan was exhausted, and while he would have admitted it to anyone else, he wasn’t sure he could to this young man. Weakness was not something Anakin would respect, and the galaxy was depending on Obi-Wan earning this young man’s respect. Besides, the boy had to be just as tired as he was.

“No,” the Jedi said carefully, but sternly. Reprimand. He expects, wants that. But not too severely, a voice that sounded suspiciously like Qui-Gon’s filled his head. “Physically, your form was perfect. Until you let your anger and fear show at the end, that is. What you need to work on is maintaining your calm, your new center. You will meditate further on finding what it is that gives peace.

“But before that,” he went on before the other could reply, “why don’t you clean yourself up? After perhaps there are some others you can contact to help you?”

The two made eye contact as an unspoken understanding went between them. With so many curious ears around, it would not be wise to speak plainly or openly of the Imperial contacts Anakin still maintained. Questions would understandably be asked, but those were still questions that did not need to be asked just yet. Anakin’s identity was still a hot topic among the Rebels, and thus far, between himself, Padmé, and surprisingly—yet thankfully—Master Yoda, no one dove into anything too deeply, despite Mon’s ever distrustful gaze.

But for now, no one else had figured out the connection between Anakin and Vader. Despite the same height, apparently not wearing black armor and a helmet was enough to keep the correlation hazy. Perhaps it had a lot to do with Anakin’s aura now, too. Vader’s presence had been stifling, black, like falling into machine oil and breathing it in whenever the Sith was around. Everyone knew the rumors about just being around him and several Rebels had been. Anakin’s aura, however, while not open or airy, was not so weighty. Being around the young man now gave one the feeling of intense energy, power. It actually gave off a feeling of extreme determination and even motivation. Despite his acerbic mood, the crew members thus far seemed to hold the stranger in high regard. They liked him, though they knew nothing about him, and Anakin gave them no reason to. Although, maybe Padmé had something to do with this too.



The two Force users stared at one another only a second more before Anakin turned and walked away. Obi-Wan had to bite back his annoyance as well as a sigh. After all that work, after the hard-earned progress they'd made, it appeared that Anakin was still determined to be disrespectful to him. Jedi apprentices did not walk away from their master without a bow and word of gratitude for the lesson. Any Jedi initiate or padawan could tell one the proper protocol was after a lesson. Apparently the Sith way was different.

Closing his eyes, Obi-Wan leaned forward and bowed to the place where Anakin had been, squeezing his eyes shut tighter as he heard the foreboding sound of claws scrapping metal and a stick hitting the hull. This was not a confrontation he had been wanting, especially with how frustrated he'd suddenly become. But pushing everything else back, remaining clam, Obi-Wan stood up and faced his master.

"Disrespectful, he is," the small green master did not hesitate to criticize. "Shows you, nor anyone, consideration."

While those were his own thoughts, the Knight felt himself become protective over the younger man. "He's still learning," he replied evenly. "Besides, what have I done to earn his respect?" His mind went instantly to his previous battles, and Obi-Wan nearly winced at his actions. Compared to Anakin, he looked like an incompetent fool in a fight.

"His master, you are. Respect, you deserve," Yoda frowned, staring off in the direction the former Sith had gone.

"True," Obi-Wan consented. "—from a Jedi's point of view. But Anakin is not a Jedi. Not yet."

The old master gave a "Humph!" causing the other to smile slightly, before they went their separate ways. Hopefully, after today's lesson, Anakin would begin to rely more on his calming center. The fact that the boy had been able to find calm gave him hope. If he was truly evil, there would be no peace for him to draw upon. But Anakin did have something that gave him ease, even if he was afraid to rely on it. This was a good start.

Now all Obi-Wan had to do was figure out how to help the boy release his self-hatred and perhaps the galaxy really did have a chance.

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Arlo Pilor sat in his office reading over reports that the new Supreme Commander had given him. DuMont's reports, compared to Lord Vader's, were disorganized and cluttery. At best.

This was not to say that DuMont was completely unorganized, but when measure up to perhaps the most deadly perfectionist in the galaxy, DuMont came up lacking. Things around the Base, too, had become... chaotic. To the outsider, it would appear as though it were running at peak efficiency, that there was absolutely nothing wrong. But for someone as deeply entrenched in the inner most workings of the Base, Pilor knew different.

Tensions were high. And getting higher.

While it seemed contradictory, now that Vader was gone, no one was happy. The Sith had sucked the joy out of the Base, had tortured them all with anxiety of inadequacy, but now that

he was gone, things were worse. They had become accustomed to the pressure, had developed a liking, even hunger, for perfection and efficiency. Slowly, over time, Vader's presence had become less of a terrifying threat and more of a reminder to them of why they were doing what they were doing: They were doing their jobs for the Empire.

They had become proud of themselves, and rightly so. They worked hard and were rewarded with little to no complications and smooth work days. With everyone on the same page, with the same work ethic, there had been no real squabbles with co-workers. The petty grumbling and complaining about another not pulling their weight or some such detail had been virtually eradicated, at least while at work. Perhaps in private, outside of work, there were some grumbles, but there were no real complaints, no real problems. Because if there were, the problem would be eliminated by the next morning.

Now that Vader was gone and DuMont had come in, the new Supreme Commander brought with him new people. New people who did not and would not incorporate themselves into the workings of the old system. The intricate programs that Vader had built up and over seen. Now with the Sith Lord gone and so many new people coming in, the carefully calculated balance was being destroyed.

The strange harmony that had come about with Vader was shattered now. The new members of staff refused to meet the majority of the Base's standards, in many cases simply because they didn't have to anymore. The new workers were seen as lazy and unproductive. The people who had worked at the Base before DuMont were now finding themselves annoyed and frustrated now rather than afraid of displeasing a Sith. It was as though their eyes had been opened and they understood. They understood what Vader had done, understood the conditioning he had put them all through. They understood that they were ultimately better than those who did not have to deal with Vader on a daily basis. They understood suddenly that within the Empire, they were the best of the best.

And now they were working with and for those with lesser skills. It was insulting. It was aggravating. It was not right.

Lord Vader had been cruel and demanding, but DuMont was somehow worse, too. He was completely unpredictable and abused his powers when he felt insecure. Only the higher-ups usually received the harshest punishments from Darth Vader, because the Sith believed them to bear the most responsibility for any given problem. With all the checks and balances the Sith had created, if a problem occurred, it was the fault of the superiors for not catching it before it came to them and caused any issues. DuMont abused the lowly and exalted those on top. It made Pilor wonder if DuMont realized that history showed it to be a very bad idea to harm the majority when they could very well rise up in rebellion. Vader had learned history.

Sighing, the Lieutenant leaned forward on his elbow as he continued reading. His training would not allow him to turn in reports to DuMont or anyone else for that matter, with so many mistakes and unclear orders in them, like the one he was working on at the moment. Reading had become laborious and bothersome. Pilor almost felt like a teacher reading through a lazy student's paper, marking all the corrections that needed to be made. Before, it hadn't been so bad, and the only major corrections he had to spend time dealing with were reports from new, training staff members. Now, it was all of the new people that didn't seem to care.

He was just about to throw his padd at the door in frustration, wanting to just be done for the day, when the door opened. Schooling his features automatically, the young man sat up straight in his chair, waiting for the visitor to make themselves known. If it's Vondran again, I'm going to kill myself, he thought sourly.

But to his surprise, it was not the new ensign, or anyone else for that matter. Instead of a human, a small blue astro-droid rolled into his office. For a moment, surprise had him sitting motionless, but again, instinct due to training, had Arlo up and moving towards the droid.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, not unkindly, though clipped and to the point. It wasn't every day that he got a visitor like this in his office. Curious.

The little droid chirped at him, rambling off several squeaks and blips, before proceeding farther into the office, the door closing behind it.

Inwardly amused, Pilor followed and went back to his seat. He sat staring behind his desk at the droid, waiting for it to do what it had obviously come here to do. The droid looked familiar somehow, he noted. Not that Arlo went out of his way to distinguish droids from one another, but this one seemed to have gotten stuck in his mind for one reason or other.

When the droid made a quick scan about the room, as though making sure it was secure, Arlo's humor instantly fled. Casually, he allowed his hand to come to rest on the intruder, silent alarm button just under his desk. He waited to see what happened, but he was tense. No Imperial droid would think to make sure the location was secure before delivering its message. They knew it was, especially this deeply into the Base. The only thing from keeping Pilor from pressing the alarm now was the nagging hint of familiarity he had with the droid.

Once it was finished, it turned back to the inwardly anxious lieutenant, before displaying a message on his desk. Arlo recognized it instantly.

Sitting forward in his desk, Pilor stared at the coded message carefully before swiftly going back to his own computer and quickly typing. When he had confirmed what he wanted, he shot up out of his chair and walked towards the door. "Stay here," he ordered the droid before locking his door. He didn't want anyone to go in and find the astromech. Just in case.

Walking with quick, long strides—a skill he'd developed being Vader's personal assistant and having to chase the Sith down and keep up with him—Pilor soon found his target. Standing sentinel outside one of the conference rooms that wasn't even being used, stood two Troopers. Despite the uselessness of their job and wastefulness of their time, the two stood together fully alert, as though they were guarding the Imperial Treasury. It was a credit to them, showing their loyalty and dedication to the Empire, but it was largely a waste. Their talents should have been used to do something else at the moment, not watching an empty room of no value in a secure, locked down base.

As he came closer, the Lieutenant watched them for any twitch, any movement, any indication that he was recognized. Neither moved a muscle. "Trooper," he called, watching to see which responded first to his voice. When one answered only a fraction of a second faster, Pilor knew he had found his man. Coming to stop before the one that had unconsciously answered first, he said, "Come with me, please."

Without hesitation or question, the Trooper followed. "He will be back momentarily," Pilor said to the other as he walked away. The remaining guard didn't say a word.

As they walked a little further away from the Trooper's original post, Arlo dared ask quietly, "CT-585?" just in case.

"Yes, Sir," the clone answered.

The rest of the journey to the office was silent, but neither minded; Pilon because his mind was abuzz with the message he'd seen, and CT-585, simply because he was a Trooper. It was only when they made it to the Lieutenant's office that another word was finally spoken. "I've got news," Arlo began.

The Trooper still stood at attention, even with the door shut and locked behind them, causing the other to frown. "This news is of a... particular sort," he said drily.

Instantly, the Trooper moved to pull off his helmet. Turning off the microphone and other recording equipment in his helmet, Cory finally came and sat down at the desk. "What's with the droid?" he jerked his head towards the R2 unit.

"The source of my news," the Lieutenant replied. "Display the message," he ordered the astromech.

The droid let out a disgruntled sort of sound, before it did as requested. Cory stared at the unit for a moment, frowning. "Isn't that the droid from Lord Vader's wing?"

Smiling, even as the message came up, Arlo nodded. "I believe it is."

The same message came up and Arlo waited silently for the Trooper to figure out what he was seeing. It didn't take long. It took only a moment before Cory's eyes widened. "This is Lord Vader's own code."

"It is indeed," Pilon nodded.

"How... I don't understand. How can we be getting a message from a dead man?" the Trooper scowled at the droid. "Prerecorded?"

"Or a fake. That's what I brought you here to help me figure out," the other replied gravely.

Together the two men decoded and read the message, becoming more and more surprised as they went on. What they were reading was absolutely incredible. It went quickly beyond what Arlo had originally believed.

"This has to be a fake," he muttered after several long minutes.

Scowling, Cory turned towards the droid. "Show the date in which this was received." The droid did as requested. It had only gotten the message today. "Source?" The source was, of course, scrambled.

"We have a real problem here," Pilon mused out loud. "Check to see if the droid is bugged."

The Trooper did as ordered and began looking the droid over, as well taking the scanner Arlo handed to him. The Lieutenant was responsible for many secrets within the Imperial Military Base. It was not unheard of or unnecessary for him to keep such equipment around in his office. In fact, Lord Vader had once hinted when Pilon had first started that it would be a

good idea to keep such things around. Because of who it was talking to him, Arlo had taken it seriously.

When it turned out that the R2 unit was safe, the two men sat back, frowning at one another. “This is perhaps the most complicated, complex code within and outside of the Empire. Lord Vader designed it himself,” Arlo scowled. “Who or what could have learned and or cracked the code enough to send us a message?”

“No one,” CT-585 answered confidently, crossing his arms over his chest.

“This doesn’t make any sense.”

“You don’t think...” Cory trailed off. Arlo waited for his companion to continue. “You don’t think that this could be... real, do you? I mean, you don’t think that he could really be alive?”

“That’s impossible,” the Lieutenant responded quickly. “I saw the film of the attack. There’s no way that—”

“But Lord Vader’s not normal. I mean, he’s not the normal man,” the Trooper pressed. “He’s made some pretty impossible escapes before, why not now?”

“But it doesn’t add up,” Arlo insisted. “Why would the Emperor throw such a big funeral for him if he wasn’t really dead? You know as well as I do that they’re... connected or something.”

“Maybe that connection’s been severed somehow.”

“Then why wouldn’t he get word the Emperor himself?”

“Maybe he couldn’t. Maybe he doesn’t want to,” Cory’s dark eyes glittered with a troubling light. “Maybe he staged the whole thing for Black Hand.”

An uncomfortable feeling wormed its way into Pilor’s stomach and dropped there like a rock. “Do you even know what you’re implying?” he hissed. “If this was all planned—which I doubt—or that he really is alive somehow then... then...”

“Black Hand will commence,” the Troop’s smile was tight. “We’d better be sure we’re ready.”

“Now wait just a minute, we still don’t know if this is real,” Pilor argued. “Maybe someone found out, found all the plans and sent this to sniff out collaborators.”

“There was no trace of plans, remember?” Cory scowled. “We searched all of his stuff, the rest we couldn’t was locked down so tight that no one could break the codes and open it. Remember? We checked for weeks after when we turned in all the computer equipment to the crews and they still haven’t broken in. They gave up.”

“That doesn’t mean someone else didn’t get to it.”

“In the Imperial Military Base?” the Trooper asked incredulously.

Pilor remained silent.

“Look,” CT-585 sighed. “If you wanna know so bad, just send a message back. Give no indication of who or what we are. Just send back something. If it is Lord Vader, he’ll figure it out. I’m sure he’ll understand your hesitancy to respond. He’d probably commend you!”

Arlo stared back at the Trooper drily. “You give a lot of credit to Lord Vader’s patience,” he muttered before turning back to the R2 unit. “Is there any way you can verify that this is an authentic message? I mean, is there any way you can know this is from Lord Vader?”

The droid beeped a string of sounds, but it all sounded negative. Glancing back over at his companion, the Lieutenant knew he was going to have to make some very serious decisions soon. If this was real, it was going to be up to him to put the final pieces of a coup together. But if it was fraud, he had just damned himself as well as CT-585. He didn’t really like the idea of being responsible for anyone else’s condemnation.

“I’ll send a message,” he informed the other slowly. ‘For the time being, do nothing. Say nothing. Do not get in contact with anyone else. And... be watchful,’ he warned with a sigh. “Someone could very well be watching me, and now you. Even as we speak.”

The clone nodded, grabbing his helmet. “Don’t worry, Sir. Either way, we won’t have anything to hide anymore,” he winked before pulling his helmet on over his head and walked out of the office, leaving the other man sitting behind his desk, wondering at the Trooper. There was certainly nothing amusing about this situation!

Green eyes scanned the droid that remained in his office. A million negative scenarios entered his mind, but he tried to push them out. “Can you send a message for me and code it?”

A positive blip was his answer.

Sitting back, Arlo thought carefully about how he should proceed. He needed to send something seemingly inconsequential, but something Lord Vader would recognize and know how to appropriately respond. There was the chance, however, that if someone had hacked this code, they would be privy to other sensitive information that had once been a secret. Despite Cory’s optimism, Pilor understood that this still stood to run a huge risk. Either way, whoever ended up sending this message to him, would determine his future.

“Send back,” he began slowly, “‘39724913’...That will be all, droid.”

The astromech beeped positively before rolling towards the door.

“Be sure to contact me the moment you receive a new message,” he ordered. “And don’t risk running any suspicion.”

Again, the droid chirped positively, before rolling out the door. As he watched it go, Arlo couldn’t help the sick feeling he still felt. Whatever was going on here, he wasn’t sure if it would all come out for better or worse tomorrow.

## 51. Final Steps

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Sitting in the dark of his room, Anakin couldn't help the self-satisfaction that surged through him as he sat pondering the future. Everything was falling perfectly into place. Everything was finally coming together. After years of pain and suffering, after waiting so patiently for the right moment, it was finally time to strike.

It had been relatively easy to convince Kenobi to let him have access to the computer from his room, and even easier to hack into the Rebel's security system. He now knew their every weakness, their every strategy, and even had their personnel roster. He now knew everything about them, and it was information he intended to use to the fullest in the near future.

But for now, this was beside the point. At the moment, he had the ability to contact his people within the Empire. Not unexpectedly, the former Sith was pleased to see that his people were at least smart enough to question the message they'd received. They had thus far corresponded several times in code, and each time his personal assistant at the Imperial Military Base had sent back nothing but small terms and numbers to questions that only Vader would know. Little things that had it been a hacker, the thief would have needed time to look up or question. But since he really was who he was claiming, Anakin had been able to answer back immediately, making it hard for anyone to doubt him.

After several messages and questions, he had finally convinced his assistant that it really was him communicating back. He had sent his instructions to his assistant, and now only had to wait a little bit longer for the rest of his plan to fall into place. His people would do as instructed, he now had to make sure that the Rebels and the Jedi played their part.

A vicious sense of delight entered him at the thought of using the Jedi like he was. They were so easily accepting, even that fool Yoda. They were both cautious with him, and Anakin could hardly blame them, but it was still interesting to see them put aside their mistrust. Foolish, but interesting. It still amazed him that they seriously considered him to be some sort of Jedi savior. Him! The man that had almost single handedly destroyed their entire Order!

There were so many things that he could do with the trust that had been given to him. His first instinct was to crush the Jedi and the Rebels, punish them for not only their bothersome, continued existence, but for being stupid about trusting him so readily. But then, even as that pleasurable thought came to mind, he paused. These were Padmé's people. These were the ones that she'd willingly thrown herself into his powers for. If anything happened to any of these people, Jedi included, she would be devastated.

The darker side of the man sneered. What did the senator think this was? Some sort of diplomatic council? This was war, and in war one used any and all advantages they had. Yet her horrified face kept filling Anakin's mind the more he seriously thought about betraying the Rebels and Jedi. He wouldn't just be betraying them though, he would be hurting her too.

Growling, the former Sith leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. The metal of his new arm bit into his skin, causing Anakin to pull up sharply. He kept forgetting that he wasn't in his suit, and that this wasn't his old arm. The last had been made of softer, cheaper

metal, the arm having to be constantly replaced. This new arm was made to last. The healers had even said that when technology allowed, they would be able to replace this one— without pain, they'd assured as if he cared—with an arm that actually looked and felt more real.

Staring down at the mechanical limb, Anakin briefly wondered what it would be like to have such an arm. To have one that looked natural and could feel. It had been four years now since he'd been dismembered, but he found that he didn't mind showing the metal of his arm. For even longer he'd barely felt anything anyway. After so long in Sidious's care, he'd lost all other feeling.

But then Padmé had come into his life.

Being more careful with what passed as an elbow, Anakin leaned forward again. Padmé, even after all this time, after much contemplation, was still very much a surprise to him. It seemed like only yesterday he was still the same feared, dreaded Sith Lord, and now... Now what was he?

It was a question that had plagued him since Tatooine. Who was he? Was he still Darth Vader, despite slipping away from the Dark Side? Or was he Anakin Skywalker, a boy that his mother wanted to believe in? The answer to that question, he supposed, was now directly linked to his desires. If he could figure out what he wanted, then it would tell him who he was. But even that question was convoluted.

What did he want? Everything. But even he knew that wasn't possible. Not even his Master had everything, despite his cravings. And really, the younger Sith had never wanted what his Master had. As Darth Vader he didn't like people, and he still didn't as Anakin. People were selfish and cruel and vain. He didn't want people, he just wanted them to behave, to respect authority. And while he wanted power, he didn't want the sort his Master did. Sidious craved being exalted, Vader had just wanted to show dominance and supremacy. Who cared what anyone else thought?

Still, even now, Anakin wanted to be emperor. It had practically been a lifelong goal. It was the ultimate symbol of success. Being emperor meant that he would have destroyed his Master and finally freed himself from a life of slavery and misery. He had always believed that should he become emperor, he would finally achieve something he had never thought possible: peace.

But hadn't he already found a source of peace? His training with Kenobi had proved that. It had not been destroying the Emperor or taking the throne that had elicited the feeling of tranquility within him the other day. In fact, it had been thinking about those things that had caused him to fail. He hadn't been able to hold on to the dream of power and remain calm, like he would have suspected.

Why was he even training in the first place? Before, Anakin had justified it with both sides of himself, saying that it was good to learn any and everything he could about the Jedi ways. He had read about the Jedi, knew what they believed, but had obviously never put their ways to practice. Since he was falling in between the two sides of the Force, he'd believed it to be prudent that he learn what he could of the Light, if just to use it against the others later. But now he wasn't so sure.



Practicing with Kenobi was... uncomfortable. Especially the other day. When the two of them had been dueling, it had been too easy to fall into rhythm with the Jedi. Far too easy. They had moved as one, as though they had practiced beforehand a dozen times. There should have been some level of awkwardness, if just because of the height difference. But there hadn't been. They had moved together, blocking each other perfectly. Where one thrust, the other parried. When one cut across, the other ducked. There had been a sense of... rightness between them. And that, more than anything frightened Anakin.

As more time went by, Kenobi was beginning to worm his way into Anakin's life just the same as Padmé had. The two of them had had everything going against them. Vader hated Jedi and senators, yet here he was, in their company and not minding it. There was just something about the young Jedi that was... familiar, almost. There was something drawing him to the Knight.

Thankfully, unlike Padmé, Anakin was able to resist the pull much more effectively with Kenobi than he had with the senator. All of this change was happening a little too quickly for his liking. He'd thought he'd made up his mind on what to do, on what he wanted, but the longer time went by, the more he ended up debating with himself.

This wasn't supposed to be so difficult. Killing his Master should have been a source of only joy for him, not all of this confusing over-thinking. Everything had once been so simple, he had had a clear goal, a straight path, and now it all seemed much more complicated than it needed to be.

Looking at the computer, Anakin decided that it could still be that way. Perhaps he was taking on too much at one time. Success depended on not getting too far ahead of yourself, a mistake his Master was prone to make. Sidious planned out far too much in advance, to the point where he very well could forget what he had planned, or ran the risk of any scheme being ruined due to alterations. Vader, on the other hand, had learned a fair lesson in not getting ahead of himself. Dooku had helped with that. In some cases, he'd learned, it paid not to think too many steps ahead. It left one more flexible and adaptable to situations. And for such a dangerous, volatile mission as killing the Emperor, one needed to be flexible and adaptable.

So Anakin decided that all he needed to do at the moment was worry about killing his old Master. Everything after that could temporarily be put on hiatus. Nothing he had planned or could plan would matter anyway if Sidious was not destroyed first. After the Emperor was dead, Anakin would see what became of everything else and decide on what he truly wanted.

Getting up, pacing around his dark room, the young man knew he should be working on his meditation, as Kenobi had told him, yet he found he couldn't bring himself to. Meditating in the Light was more difficult than he thought. Especially since his mind constantly went to darker thoughts. The Light told him he should not revel in Sidious's eventual demise, yet how could he not? The Light told him to rid himself of passions, yet his mind in the quiet of the night always went to Padmé.

And therein laid another problem. Padmé. Ever since he'd confronted her about hiding something from him, he hadn't gotten the idea out of his head. Why wouldn't she tell him? Her reasoning was, of course, sound, but the secret gnawed at his brain. She was right in saying he had to keep his mind on his mission, he knew that. Destroying the Emperor came

first. And yet in the quiet of night, he couldn't help but think of her and what she wasn't telling him.

On more than one occasion he'd thought about just reading her thoughts, forcing her to tell him, but then, he'd unofficially promised he wouldn't. It was aggravating, and he might have already forced the information from her, promise or no promise, if he hadn't felt her anxiety and fear. She was afraid of something, yet she did not want to tell him about it. If it was critical to the mission, she would have said something. That was too important. They couldn't afford to keep him in the dark about anything about the mission. Yet whatever this was, was important, at least to her.

Sitting back down, Anakin sighed. All of these clashing options and opinions that all seemed to be his own, were giving him a headache. Being here, being with so many outside of his normal associates, was beginning to take its toll on the young man. Stepping out the Darkness and into the Light was a dizzying experience as new senses came to life. It was like stretching muscles you had forgotten you had, and it left him tender and sore. All around him he felt the Light Side of the Force, even in some of the most confusing places.

Light emanated from not only the Jedi, but Padmé too seemed to be growing with the sense of Light. She was not a Jedi, but he had always known she was sympathetic to it. Was his newly awakening senses finally getting a more accurate reading of her now? Had he really not seen how brilliant she was by being covered so thickly in Darkness? It only added to his restlessness about her secret. What if it was something else?

The door chimed, and as he came out of his thoughts, the former Sith didn't need to open the door to know who was on the other side. As he stepped out, he looked down to see Padmé smiling up at him. She was wearing a loose fitting gown, and her hair was piled up on her head today. While the clothes were casual, Anakin couldn't help but think she looked... radiant. She was beaming, and without realizing it, as he stared at her, the Darkness that lingered within him shrank back slightly. All thought of ruling the Empire were pushed further aside in her presence.

"Good morning," the senator smiled brightly.

Anakin wished he could return the smile, but something always held him back. She was such a pure creature and he was...

He nodded back without a word, jerking himself away from such useless, wistful thoughts. Padmé didn't seem to mind his lack of communication, however. She had, more than likely, gotten used to him by now. It was both comforting and disturbing.

"Are you ready?" she asked, still beaming up at him.

With another nod, Anakin began leading the way. His long strides were rapidly leaving the senator behind, and when he realized this, he forced himself to slow down. Soon, the two of them were strolling along the halls together. The pace was almost agonizingly slow for Anakin, but at the same time, he didn't mind it much if it meant making Padmé comfortable and keeping her by his side. She always looked so fragile, so breakable. A wave of protectiveness swept over him, and he found himself vowing to destroy anyone who would dare think of hurting the tiny woman. He had to protect her glow.

Soon, the two reached what passed as the conference room. As they entered, Anakin spied Senators Mothma and Organa, along with the two Jedi, and Admiral Uton. There were several other Rebel high ranking officers that Anakin had seen on the files he'd gone through, but didn't care to memorize their profiles as extensively. He could do that later if it turned out they were anything to worry about. But from what he gathered, they were not so brilliant. They would be little threat to the Empire.

"Senator Amidala, Master Anakin," Mon Mothma greeted stiffly. "Please take your seats."

There were only two empty seats left, and with a smile, Padmé walked around the table and sat in between Bail Organa and another officer. The young man couldn't help the small frown that came to his face at being separated from her, but he pushed the thought aside. Instead, he went and sat down in between Uton and Kenobi. Once everyone was in place, Mothma sat at the head of the table and began the meeting.

"As I understand it," the Chadrilian began, "Master Anakin has a plan in which to overthrow the Empire?"

"No," Anakin answered bluntly. He sensed surprise and wariness from around the table at his frankness, but he went on before Kenobi ridiculously thought to speak up in his defense. He could defend himself. 'I have a plan to destroy the Emperor,' he clarified. "No one can overthrow the Empire with one battle. Like all political systems, it would take a much greater time to disentangle Imperial politics from the galaxy and abolish it completely."

"Anakin's offering us a beginning," Padmé said from across the table, locking onto his eyes for a brief moment before turning back to Mothma. "With the Emperor gone, it would leave us all in a good position to begin reinstating old, Republic laws."

"And how could that be?" an officer at the end of the table, Commander Lydy, asked pointedly. "Some of these people are die-hard Imperialists. They won't like the idea of suddenly becoming a Republic again."

"I didn't say it would be right away," Padmé argued back easily. "I'm only saying that there has never been a Galactic Empire. In nearly everyone's lifetime, there has only been a Republic. With the Emperor gone, the Empire would be in panic. It would be easier, and instinctual, to fall back on the past, to a system everyone is familiar with. People would be less terrified by a new Republic than having a different system they are not used to."

"We would have to be in the right place at the right time to establish that, then," Organa chimed. "We're going to have to have people placed in just the right places if we're to be in any position to rebuild a Republic after the Emperor's fall. I'm sure there are some power-hungry Moffs who would love to say they have legitimate claims to the throne."

Without realizing it, Anakin found himself nodding to the senator's statement. "The new Supreme Commander will, no doubt, make a play for the throne," Uton replied gravely. "Our informants sent word that DuMont had already firmly entrenched himself in the Imperial Base. Said that the Supreme Commander is walking in Vader's boots now."

And not doing it very well, Anakin thought, inwardly pleased, even as he seethed at knowing someone was foolish enough to attempt replacing him. DuMont was not at all well received by the Imperials, at least those that Vader had conditioned, and it surprised Anakin that the Rebel spies did not pick up on this. Apparently the Rebels either couldn't get their

men in deeply enough into the Imperial system— a fact that pleased Anakin—or their informants were incompetent. Either seemed just as likely to him.

For just the briefest moment, the former Sith thought about sharing the information he knew with the others. He could tell them that DuMont was not at all liked and help them plan their attacks accordingly. It would, no doubt, help the Jedi trust him more, and please Padmé. But it didn't really serve his other plans and went against his other instincts. He did not like the idea of being a traitor. And so, he said nothing.

"Governor Tarkin has also been getting closer to the Emperor," Mon murmured. "Rumor has it that he was put in charge of some big project by the Emperor personally. He is the new favorite. It is very likely that he would be seriously considered."

Discretely, Anakin saw out of the corner of his eye, that Padmé was looking at him. Was she expecting him to confirm these things? If so, she was sadly mistaken. Besides the fact that he didn't want to say anything, how could he? If he began divulging any sensitive information it would put the Rebels on alert. Thus far they saw him as only a Force-user, a supposed Jedi savior that was found by the senator and Kenobi. To demonstrate knowledge of anything else would be suspicious.

While the former Sith tried to ignore the hard look, Padmé eventually took on a thoughtful expression. "I wonder if that would be the DS-1 Orbital Battle Station," she mused out loud.

Turning sharply, Anakin found himself demanding, "What?"

Turning a cool expression on her lover, the senator repeated, "The DS-1 Orbital Battle Station. Its construction has been disguised as a planetary ore extractor."

Fury welled up within Anakin at the haughty look he received. That was perhaps the most sensitive information in the galaxy! How the kriff had she gotten a hold of it?

But before he could lose his temper with her, Mothma spoke up. "What are you talking about, Padmé?"

Turning to the other senator, Padmé studiously ignored the seething former Sith. "The information I told you about and gave to you," she said simple. "Remember? I had given you a list. It was on that."

It's the information she'd hacked from the Base, Anakin realized in amazement. She never let on that she knew about the Death Star. Grudgingly, he found his respect for the woman had increased even as he fumed and fought to crush violent impulses.

"What is this battle station?" Uton asked, leaning forward, all ears.

"I'm not sure," Padmé admitted. "I wasn't able to find out anything more about it. I don't know where it's located or what it does. But from the sound of it, it can't be very good. Especially if they're disguising it as an ore extractor. It's bound to be huge."

The size of a small moon, Anakin thought, almost wishing he could tell, if just to see the looks on their faces.

"I have hope, however," she went on before the admiral dismissed her completely, "that it's still being built and won't be useable for at least a while longer yet. It shouldn't affect our

current plans, but if we succeed in this, we'll have to entertain the idea of protecting ourselves against it later on."

"Perhaps Anakin and I can do a little digging," Kenobi spoke up from beside the former Sith. "I'm sure between the two of us, we can at least find something out about it."

The two men locked eyes, and Anakin would have loved nothing more than to smash the other's smug looking face into the table. The only thing stopping him from doing so were his plans. He couldn't jeopardize his one chance at taking out the Emperor. And truly, the Rebels knowing about the Death Star was largely inconsequential. At the moment, they didn't have enough people left, and certainly wouldn't after their planned battle to destroy the Emperor. To confront the Death Star, or even get through the defense around the construction site, would be futile. And with some solid planning and quick action, after he destroyed Sidious, Anakin could easily wipe out the rest of the Rebellion. All premature knowledge of the Death Star would be gone, and when the battle station was revealed, it would be not only operational, but a complete surprise to the galaxy.

So, tempering his rage, Anakin found himself giving a slight nod before glaring down at the table top. A surge of hatred enveloped him, but he swallowed that too. It didn't matter, none of this mattered in the long run, he told himself. He apparently, however, had to watch his lover and the Jedi Knight a little bit closer from now on.

"So DuMont and Tarkin will be our biggest political enemies," Organa went on, "and DuMont will especially have to be watched. He has control of the entire Imperial Navy, and I'm sure the army will be with him."

"How will we defeat those?" someone at the end of the table, Astor, ask.

"When the heads are removed, confusion the rest of the followers will become," Master Yoda spoke up. "In time of confusion, quickly we must be, before organize the Imperials can become again."

"But what of the clone army?" Lydy growled. "I doubt they'll sit by and watch. They're programmed to act even if others do not. And the clones make up over half of the Imperial forces."

"I have on good authority that the clones will follow what they perceived as the more legitimate government," the Jedi Knight folded his hands on the table. "If we move quickly enough, establish a head, they will take orders and ultimately can be used by us."

"This is all too risky," Uton muttered. "We need something solid, a clear objective, before I'm willing to risk our forces."

"Such concerns didn't seem to bother you when you attacked over Naboo," Anakin replied drily.

The room went very still. The air swirled with an angry buzz, even as the former Sith appeared calm. Both Uton and Mothma winced. They knew exactly what he'd meant.

"Besides," Anakin went on, "there are always great risks in war. Without risks, there can never even be possibilities of victory."

"But the clones—" Uton began.

“The clones should not be your concern, Admiral,” Anakin snapped. “Worry about winning the battle first and foremost. You will be attacking from above.”

“You can leave the clones to us,” Kenobi said evenly. “I have had experience with Clone Troopers before. We’ve got a plan. Leave the ground penetration to us.”

The rest of the meeting went by fairly uninterestingly. While the others planned out their battle so that Anakin could defeat the Emperor, the former Sith found his mind wandering to Padmé, of how she had gotten information on the Death Star, of her part in this coup, and even what she would be to him after all this. He knew for a fact that should he chose to become Emperor and rule the galaxy she would not want anything to do with him. She cared for Anakin, not Vader. The very thought of being his empress was repulsive to her. He could always make her, but that would crush her spirit, shatter her glow. He could bring himself to do that.

This would, no doubt, be an interesting time for him, Anakin knew. Everything that had once anchored him to reality now seemed to alienated him, and he felt adrift between the Light and Dark. Soon he would have to chose which to follow more solidly, and there would be no turning back this time. He couldn’t go on living in this in-between purgatory.

But one step at a time.

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Screams could be heard bouncing off the walls, but by now, Trooper QP-4913 was experienced enough to ignore the echoes of agony. He was a highly trained, specialized Clone Trooper, one that, he was proud to say, was entrusted with some of the most sensitive information within the Empire. He and his companion, VR-116, had been on plenty of missions together that required the utmost secrecy and care. They had served the Empire well over the past four years.

But as he stood watching the interrogation being performed in front of him, blood beginning to pool at his boots, QP-4913 felt a twinge of concern. Not for the prisoner. Rebels didn’t garner his sympathy. No, over the past several weeks, he’d become increasingly restless with the safety of the Empire. He had fought long and hard against the Separatists and Rebels and was not the only one who wanted to preserve what he and his brother had fought so hard to protect and create. But now...

The menacing laughs of the former Supreme Commander of the Droid Army caused the Trooper to scowl under his helmet. While he would admit to not being the smartest of men or clones, QP-4913, like any clone, was bred to be loyal. And he considered himself to be. Loyal to the Empire. To the Emperor. So why then was the Emperor testing him like this? Glaring under his helmet at the creature that was little better than a droid, QP-4913 couldn’t help feeling betrayed. Betrayed by the Emperor.

This wasn’t right. General Grievous was not meant to be alive. The Emperor was not meant to trust this thing. Had the Emperor gone mad? Trusting this traitor? It was a thing unheard of and it disgusted the Trooper to his core.

Lord Vader would have never permitted this to happen. When Lord Vader had been alive there had been honor and dignity within the Empire. He certainly never ordered Troopers to

take up with traitors. Lord Vader would never push their loyalty like this. When Lord Vader had been alive, there had been some protection and benefits for clones. Now...

A guttural scream escaped the prisoner, and the Troopers watched dispassionately as Grievous's metal, claw-like hand ripped into the Bothan's stomach and began grabbing at internal organs. Blood spattered everywhere, but neither clone so much as winced. Disembowelment was always a painful way to die, either the Rebel would break and plead for a swift end, or he would suffer for perhaps an hour or so before succumbing to death. It wasn't the first time that QP-4913 had seen this.

"Tell me who you are working for!" Grievous demanded for perhaps the third or fourth time. Lord Vader would have had him talking by the second.

The Bothan screamed again, wreathing pathetically in his metal bonds before finally panting out a strangled, "Organa."

"And where is Senator Organa?"

Nothing.

"WHERE?!"

"N-Na-a-boo."

The cyborg turned his attention to the Rebel's eyes. "Where on Naboo?"

QP-4913 watched as the Bothan's rapidly rising and falling chest began to slow. In another moment, it stilled, and the head lulled uselessly to the side. The Rebel was dead, and not much information was gained. What a waste.

Grievous let out a strangled growl before he backhanded the body. He hit it over and over again, blood droplets flinging everywhere, until the white armor of the Storm Troopers were speckled red. They continued to watch as the cyborg began mutilating the corpse in frustration, and QP-4913 couldn't help think of how Lord Vader would have gotten the required information.

When Grievous had calmed, he turned sharply to the two Troopers who stood watching silently. Without a word, the monstrous creature turned and stalked out of the cellar, the others expected to follow. VR-116 was the first to move, and QP a second later. Without meaning to, the latter found himself glancing back at the remains of the Bothan hanging against the wall. It would be one hell of a surprise tomorrow when the inhabitance of the inn found him in the cellar in the morning, the owners also slaughtered behind the desk.

Like everywhere else they went, the trio left without a further sound, and without an incriminating trace. No one knew what they'd done, and no one ever would. In a way, it bothered QP-4913. He could never divulge this information to anyone. Ever. And the only one he could talk to was VR-116. Not that he wanted to talk about his collaboration with a traitor.

Soon, they were back on their ship and traveling out into the stars, on their next mission as dictated by General Grievous. While the cyborg went to his room, the two clones sat in the cockpit, staring out at the stars. They pulled off their helmets and just sat silently with each other for a moment, both digesting what they had seen that day.

Even after some time thinking on it, mulling it over, QP-4913 decided that what he was doing wasn't right. It wasn't right working with the enemy. This was not how things were supposed to go. This was not what his duty was supposed to be like.

"Lord Vader wouldn't approve of this."

QP-4913 turned sharply to stare at his companion. VR-116 was looking at him, face grim. It was the first time either of them had brought up the Sith Lord since their new mission to assist Grievous sniff out traitors.

"I know," QP-4913 answered back with the only thing he could think of.

The two clones shared a look which spoke all the words they could not say. It spoke louder than any of their words ever could. And after a moment, they went back to their duties, wondering what the future would hold.



## 52. The Great Reveal

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Padmé was nervous. While she was a woman who prided herself in her ability to remain calm in desperate, terrifying situations, at the moment, she was hard pressed to appear composed. But while she might have scoffed at herself in the past for such anxiousness, she reasoned that this situation was a good reason to lose nerve.

This was it, after all. After a week on the Rebel Base, after intense training for Anakin, they were finally going to put Operation Black Hand into action. The plans had been set; each member of the Rebel Alliance knew their part. Despite having to put a tremendous amount of trust in the Jedi and Anakin, despite horrifying reports coming in from around the galaxy of upheaval and chaos, they were willing to do their part. They were willing to risk their lives so that there would be a chance at peace in the galaxy. It made Padmé tremendously proud of them. And sad.

Readjusting her pack, the senator adjusted her cloak around herself, trying to hide her changing shape. Thankfully Obi-Wan had had spare clothes for a woman with a spare cloak that she could use. Padmé wondered where the Jedi had gotten it, the garments looking like Jedi clothes, but she knew better than to ask right now. The Knight had seemed rather... grim when he'd given it to her, and poignant. It had probably belonged to someone he'd known who had been killed by Order 66 but hadn't been able to get rid of it. The senator vowed to wear the clothes in honor, and hope she didn't disgrace the memory of the woman who had once adorned this garment.

Taking a deep breath, Padmé left her room and soon met up with Dormé. The other woman was similarly dressed, her own pack secure on her back. While the senator hated to think of her friend going down into the fight, she also knew she couldn't stop her former handmaiden. Dormé had made it very clear that she wasn't going to let Padmé do this alone. It was a comforting, yet terrifying thought.

The two women walked until they made it to the docking bay where the ship that would be taking them to Coruscant sat. In the distance, Padmé could see Anakin and Obi-Wan looking over the craft, making last minute modifications, while Master Yoda sat near Bail, both watching the final processes taking place. Mon was there, with Uton, and neither rebel leader seemed particularly pleased. They were still distrustful and leery of what was about to happen, and Padmé didn't exactly blame them.

"Don't worry," she said once she was near the two rebel leaders. "We've got this all planned. Everything will turn out right in the end."

"And how can you be sure?" Mon asked, raising a manicured brow. "We're taking a tremendous risk, Padmé, with only the word of the Jedi to back up their claims."

"Isn't that enough?" Dormé spoke up, frowning. "The Jedi have never let us down."

"Except the time they allowed themselves to be destroyed," Uton snorted, scowling.

Dormé bristled, trembling with anger, and Padmé wasn't much better. "They didn't allow themselves to be destroyed," the senator snapped. "I doubt you would have done any better than them with such overwhelming odds."

"We're facing overwhelming odds now," Mon pointed out drily.

"True, but we've got a plan and we're prepared," Padmé sniffed. "And besides, we have the Chosen One this time. The Jedi did not."

"And where was he when all of this began?" Uton glared out across the bay towards Anakin. "If he is so mighty, why wasn't he there to stop this from happening in the first place?"

Because he was the one spearheading the operation, Padmé thought miserably, unable to answer.

Thankfully Dormé wasn't finished yet. "You heard Senator Amidala and Knight Kenobi. He was on Tatooine, unaware of what was going on," she glared. "It's not right to blame him when he has done nothing wrong."

While what she was saying was, in effect, wrong, Padmé appreciated her friend's fervent loyalty. She just wished what Dormé had said was true. It was getting harder and harder to actually believe that Anakin had really been the man behind the suit of Darth Vader. He had changed so much in truly a short amount of time. He had made so much progress with Obi-Wan over the past several days. It was easier to actually believe that Anakin and Vader were two completely separate individuals. But they weren't. And that's what Padmé had to remember.

The four fell silent, each lost in thought. They stayed quiet until the source of their argument walked over. "We're ready," Anakin informed them bluntly. "Remember, wait until Kenobi makes contact before you begin your attack. Do not believe that you must stand and fight. Your objective is to distract and lead away, even if it's just as far as the next planet, that will be enough."

"I know the plan," Uton snapped, glaring up at the young man. Padmé wondered at the negativity between the two men, but then again, both were commanders, they were soldiers, and neither one liked to be the one ordered around. They only liked giving them. "This isn't my first battle."

Just the barest hint of an upturned shadowed on Anakin's lips showed his delight, and unkind amusement lit his pale eyes. But he said nothing even as he turned and walked away. It was a better response than what might have occurred several months ago. In the past, Vader would have taken great offense and his pride would not allow him to remain still. While the humor was somewhat... dark, and at Uton's expense, Padmé supposed it was better to have this nasty sense of humor rather than having him lash out and kill the man.

Looking over at Dormé, the Naboo senator signaled for her to follow. It had been greatly debated the night before about whether or not Dormé and Bail would be coming on this mission. Anakin had been fiercely against the idea, claiming it would be easier to have a small team, concerned that the others would get in the way since they were not privy to sensitive, need-to-know information. Yet the others had argued in favor. Neither the Alderaan Senator nor the Naboo handmaiden were defenseless creatures. Both had been

trained and could handle themselves. In the end, Anakin had been forced to give, something that Padmé believed was good for him. He couldn't always be allowed to get his way.

And so, after some last minute instructions and review, the five humans and Master Yoda boarded the ship and took off out of the Freedom that had served as the Rebel Base since the Battle Over Naboo. Even now, Padmé knew Anakin wasn't happy about everyone being there with him. She supposed he'd always believed that this was a battle he'd have to do alone. He wasn't used to the support he was receiving. But she would see to it that he kept getting it nonetheless.

When the ship was safely in hyperspace, Obi-Wan and Anakin, who were piloting the ship, came to the back where the others sat. When the two men sat down with the company, it was Obi-Wan who spoke first. "All right, before we get to Coruscant, I think we need to... confess a few little secrets to you both," he addressed Bail and Dormé.

Both frowned. "What do you mean?" Bail asked slowly. Beside him, Master Yoda snorted, clearly still not happy.

Again, dark humor glinted in Anakin's eyes, and he turned his strangely self-satisfied, yet stoic face towards his lover, as if wanting her to share in his amusement. A part of her really wanted to, to show him she was with him, yet the other half was concerned about his meanness. It would, yet again, be something they would need to discuss at length once the battle was over. If there was time...

"What we didn't tell anyone in Rebel High Command is that we have... informants of our own within the Imperial ranks," the Jedi Knight explained.

"What?" Bail asked, clearly astonished.

"So don't shoot any Imperial officers unless I tell you," Anakin chimed, another wave of humor coloring the bond he shared with Padmé, even as his face remained neutral.

"I see," the Alderaanian replied slowly. "That's why you were so confident with the trooper debate? You have good information from within?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan nodded. "This will no doubt be... strange for the both of you, and full explanations will take too long, so please just... be patient and open minded as we proceed, and know that everything is under control. There will be no need to be alarmed when we land."

"My informants will be briefing us on the situation planet-side," the former Sith said calmly. "They will be bringing with them supplies and uniforms we will need."

"Wonderful," Dormé smiled, but it faltered. "But how is it you have informants, Master Anakin? I thought you weren't involved in the struggle until you joined up with the Rebels?"

The big man ignored the question and instead, turned to Master Yoda. "You have something to say?" The tone was cold, but it was progress that he'd thought to ask at all.

The old creature eyed the group steadily for a moment before sighing. "Deception, never should your path be. Truth must flow for trust to exist."

"And have we said a lie, Master?" Obi-Wan asked, curiosity in his voice just as much as defense.

The small green Jedi sighed once more, shaking his head, but otherwise remained silent. Padmé found herself feeling sympathy for Yoda. Despite his coldness to them since arriving on the Rebel Base, the Grand Master had not interfered with what was going on. He disapproved, obviously, but he made no trouble. He objected, but otherwise said very little. He'd even sat in on some of Obi-Wan and Anakin's lessons, offering help and advice to the Knight when he could. While the senator knew Anakin hated the Jedi Master, surprisingly he had remained rather tame as well. Perhaps he really had learned a lot since stepping into the Light. Perhaps there really was a very great hope and her worries had been for not?

She understood Yoda, however. He only wanted what was best for everyone, for the galaxy. Trusting a Sith, former or not, was a huge step for anyone to make. It had taken her months to stop grimacing any time Vader entered a room. But Darth Vader was gone, Yoda had to see that. It was Anakin, just Anakin that remained. Or so Padmé repeated to herself over and over in her mind.

"Cautious we must all be," the Grand Master of the former Jedi Order responded at last. "Grave, our situation is. All work together, we must, for victory to be ours," he gave Anakin an especially hard look.

"Just do as I tell you and the plan should work," the former Sith replied haughtily before standing and walking back to the front of the ship.

Sighing, Padmé let her eyes drop down to the floor. While a lot of progress had been made, there was still so much to be done with him. Anakin had not acted this way on Tatooine, but when around Jedi, there was a distinct tension between them, and his automatic response seemed to fall back on arrogant superiority. Perhaps he was the better fighter. Perhaps he was a more brilliant strategist. But humility was ultimately what was needed to survive in the Light. He needed to let go of the illusion of competition, of supremacy. If he did not, she feared Anakin would slip back into the Darkness he'd fought so hard to crawl out of.

"The closer we get, the more aware Sidious will become of us," Obi-Wan addressed the group. "Especially since we have three Force-sensitives onboard, two of which are incredibly powerful."

Master Yoda's eyes softened as he stared at his former pupil. "Three," he corrected gently.

"That being the case," the younger Jedi went on, pretending he didn't hear, "we will have to move quickly and efficiently."

"If the Emperor knows we're coming, then what is the point of this?" Dormé frowned. "Is there no way to hide your... Force-sensitivity?"

"Not really," Obi-Wan shook his head. "We can try and dampen it, but ultimately, it will still shine through. It doesn't matter, though. We will be catching the Emperor enough off guard. He does not know Anakin's Force presence anymore. That will be the true surprise."

Bail and Dormé both frowned deeply at the use of 'anymore', but stayed silent. They were suspicious, and rightfully so, but they also appeared to be able to put that aside for the good of the mission. Their loyalty to Padmé and to the Jedi was commendable, and she hoped that they would continue to be so in the future. Because they really needed them.

As the Jedi continued to explain the plan to their new recruits, Padmé excused herself and went up to the cockpit. Anakin was agitated about something, and she knew she had to talk to him. This could very well be, after all, their last time together.

Walking in, she found Anakin looking over the controls, rechecking the their position and other menial tasks. He was fidgety, she realized, nervous. Afraid.

Alarmed, the senator went and sat down next to her lover. Anakin didn't look at her as he continued his work. On the outside, he appeared as stony as ever. Not a hint of feeling could be seen. But on the inside, she could feel his emotions churning. This wasn't just some sort of inconsequential routine mission they were going on. This battle would ultimately decide the fate of the galaxy. It had never occurred to her that the former Sith could get nervous.

After another minute, when he still didn't speak, Padmé reached over and put her hand on his arm. "Hey," she said softly. "Are you okay?"

Icy eyes glanced up for only a moment before turning back down. "I've planned this day for years. I've dreamed of nothing else for six-teen years. And now, it's finally happening."

"It will be all right," Padmé soothed, rubbing his arm. "I'm sure you can defeat the Emperor."

"Of course I can defeat him," at last, Anakin turned and looked into her face. But what the senator saw surprised her. He looked... torn, confused. She hadn't seen this look since they were on Tatooine.

"Then what's wrong?" she pressed carefully.

Anakin opened his mouth, as if to speak, but then thought better of it. Once more he shut down, closed himself off to her. It was frustrating, and Padmé was struggling to be patient and understand. But it had been so long, did he not trust her now, even after all they'd been through? But you're fighting years of isolation and training, she reminded herself. Patience. Patience was the key.

"Whatever it is you're doubting," she began gently, "don't. We've planned this out. You've been training. You've learned from Obi-Wan well. We both know you'll defeat the Emperor."

"And after?"

The question took her by surprise, though she didn't know why. Blue eyes blazed with an earnestness Padmé had never seen in them before. Was that it? Was he afraid of the future? Was he worried about the next step? Truly, they hadn't planned that far ahead, but with Anakin's help she knew everything would turn out right in the end. It just had to.

"After... we build a new Republic," she shrugged, knowing that was not what he had meant, but unable to think of anything else to say.

A dark scowl crawled across his lips, but was gone a moment later, replaced with a thoughtful frown. She didn't know what it meant, and it frightened her. What was he really asking her?

Fear snaked its way through the senator as a dreadful thought occurred and images of Vader appeared in her mind. "Anakin," she said quietly. "I... Please just... come back to me when this is over."

The other sat up in his seat, frowning at her. "I said I would."

"No," Padmé shook her head. "You come back."

The two lovers stared at one another, emotions swirling around them. Just as Anakin opened his mouth to speak, alarms went off. Turning sharply away, the former Sith looked over the controls. A second later, Obi-Wan came rushing in. "Are we nearing Coruscant?" he asked, taking the co-pilot's seat once Padmé stepped out of the way.

"Yes. We'll be landing within fifteen minutes," Anakin replied, studiously ignoring the small woman.

No sooner had he spoken then the ship came out of hyperspace. A second later, Padmé once again saw the familiar sight of Coruscant's glowing city in all of its brilliant light. But it was different since she'd last seen it. There was the build up security around the planet, Star Destroyers floating ominously in orbit, as if creating a blockade. There would be no way to enter without the proper authorization.

In front of her, Obi-Wan shifted uncomfortably. "Are you sure those new codes your people sent you are valid?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And your people will be meeting us? They won't betray you?"

Anakin glanced over at his master without turning his head. "That would be unwise of them," he said darkly, a threat hanging loosely in the air, just waiting to be made.

"Unidentified vessel, please identify yourself," a command came from one of the patrolling ships.

The two Force-sensitives shared a look before Obi-Wan put on his headset. "This is the Tactin, requesting permission to land."

"Please verify landing clearance."

"Roger," the Knight nodded to himself, as Anakin began plugging in the numbers.

There was a tense moment when Padmé's grip dug into the back of Obi-Wan's chair as they waited for clearance. Not even on the planet yet and already Padmé was feeling tense. That wasn't a good sign. She knew it would be important for them all to remain calm, but it was already proving difficult.

After a torturous eternity, which in reality only took about thirty seconds or so, a response finally came. "Tactin, you may proceed planetside."

"Roger that. Tactin out," Obi-Wan replied with a smile. Once they disconnected, he grinned over at his apprentice. "So far so good."

"You should prepare the others for our landing. Once we hit down we will be moving," Anakin advised.

"I'll do it," Padmé offered.

With a grateful nod from the Knight and not even a glance from her lover, the senator went in back to tell the others. Among them all there was a nervous tension that circulated. It was not unexpected, but it did make getting ready and mentally preparing difficult.

They had all grabbed their belongings, made their last minute checks, before they felt the craft land. Soon Obi-Wan and Anakin came to the back, faces both set in determined, grim expressions. "Let's go," Anakin ordered as he strode to the exit, activating the ramp.

As a group, they disembarked, and the first sight that greeted Padmé was a stiff looking Lieutenant-Commander Piett and the ever vigilant CT-585. The moment the young Imperial's eyes fell upon Anakin, they widened as he blinked rapidly, not expecting what he saw. But to his credit, Piett recovered remarkably quickly as he rushed forward.

"If you would follow me, please, my lord," he gestured to an Imperial shuttle.

Anakin eyed his inferiors for a split second before he continued his long stride towards the other craft. The others followed a little less confidently, CT-585 bringing up the rear. Glancing about her while she could, Padmé saw that they had landed in a slum, a poor district. It was probably the wisest decision so as not to bring unwanted attention upon themselves, but it only served to make her feel more jumpy, especially with getting into one of those stark, bleak Imperial shuttles again.

Once everyone was in, Cory went to the front to pilot the craft. Bail and Dormé watched the trooper go with obvious distrust, while the Jedi wore expressions of forced calm. Only Anakin was truly at ease. And when the craft was up and they were moving, he turned on Piett.

"Report," he barked.

"Everything is going according to plan, my lord. However," the young man hesitated only a fraction of a second, "there was an unidentified ship that landed within the palace grounds several nights ago. It had top priority clearance, but we were unable to determine who or what was in it."

The former Sith frowned a moment, an intense expression of concentration on his face before he waved his hand. "It is of little importance. Did you bring all that I asked?"

"Yes, my lord," Piett nodded, pointing to a large crate in the corner of the shuttle. "If you would like to prepare yourself, my lord."

"Yes," Anakin nodded, walking around the back of the crate and ripping it open.

Piett, too, went to work, and walked up to the front of the shuttle. He came back carry an Imperial uniform. He eyed the group carefully, before walking up to Obi-Wan. "I believe this was meant for you, sir," he nodded to the Jedi.

"Wonderful," the Knight replied blandly, as he began stripping out of his tunic and legging to slip into the uniform.

Padmé was amused to see that Anakin was a little more modest as he changed. The young man stood behind the monstrous crate as he pulled on his black suit out of view. Through their bond, she felt a spike of fear shoot through him, and dread. He didn't like the suit. It was

haunting. It was a sign of what he had only recently escaped from. But it's only for a little longer, she thought pityingly. After this, he would never have to wear it again.

Bail was frowning, his eyes always darting between watching Anakin and Piett. "Weren't you Lord Vader's personal assistant?" the senator asked finally, addressing the Imperial.

"Yes," Piett nodded. "At least, when on board the Executor. He had another assistant at the Imperial Base."

"I didn't know the Rebels had such informants so highly ranked and entrenched within the system," Dormé breathed, obviously impressed.

Firmus, however, was shocked and insulted as he sputtered out, "I am not a rebel, ma'am!"

Confusion swam around the group. Padmé thought she was going to have to finally explain, when a chilling hiss filled the space. Everyone instantly stiffened, freezing in place. Almost as one, the group turned as Anakin walked out from behind the crate, fully adorned in the black suit of Darth Vader.

"It would not matter anymore if you were, Commander," the booming voice of the dreaded Sith Lord responded. "I know a great many things now."

Strangely enough, Piett seemed to relax once he saw the infamous mask. "Yes, my lord," he responded instantly.

The helmet of Vader swiveled towards Obi-Wan, now dressed as an Imperial commander. He nodded in approval, before turning to the rest of the company. "We will be arriving near the Imperial Base," he informed them. "Once we stop, Kenobi, you must signal the rebels to begin their attack."

The Knight nodded, blue-green eyes uneasy. Sneaking a glance over at her friends, Padmé watched as simultaneously, color from both Dormé and Bail's faces drained. Padmé supposed she couldn't blame them. It was a pretty big reveal, she supposed. Obi-Wan and Yoda had at least had the benefit of the Force whispering to them the truth, and Padmé had been beside Anakin throughout his transformation. But Bail and Dormé...The poor people had trusted them without question. They had both even come to respect Anakin, like him even despite how hard it was to do. This was certainly a shock, to say the least.

Dormé's eyes were wide as she blinked over at the big man, still bone white, while Bail began rambling. "I knew it. I knew something was strange about all of this, I just didn't think... I didn't..." the Alderaanian trailed off.

"How can you trust him?!" Dormé screeched, staring incredulously at Padmé, Yoda, and Obi-Wan. "He's—he's a—a monster!"

"We will be arrive at our destination momentarily," Anakin replied, ignoring the outbursts with detached coldness, "It would be in our best if you didn't try to shoot any Imperial officers until I order it," he repeated drily. It sent a shiver down Padmé spine to hear Vader's voice again.

"My lady," the handmaiden took the senator's hands in her own. "What's wrong with you? Please let me help you! If he's brainwashed you—"



“Anakin hasn’t brainwashed anyone,” Obi-Wan replied evenly, firmly. His blue-green eyes glowed with determination. “And you must remember that he’s not Darth Vader anymore. At least not on the inside. His name is Anakin, and he is really helping us defeat the Emperor.”

“Why?” Bail blurted, dark eyes alight with fear and distrust. “This doesn’t make sense. Any of it. Why would you want—”

“Enough,” the lost voice of Vader snarled, having finally lost patience.

“Please, just... trust us,” Padmé pleaded with her friends. “I know this is surprising, but we know what we’re doing. Just... follow instructions. Please?”

Dormé and Bail were both silent a minute before the Alderaanian shook his head. “I don’t like this,” he muttered. “If this is a trick—”

“This isn’t a trick,” the younger senator tried to soothe. “Just trust me on this. Things aren’t as they seem.”

The shuttle came to a stop and Cory came walking out with his blaster in hand. Without a word, he walked past the group, shoving his weapon into Bail’s arms. The senator let out an “oof!” at the unexpected blow, but recovered instantly. The trooper preceded farther back into the shuttle before he pulled out another blaster. Turning, he threw it at Dormé, who caught it easily. He did the same for Padmé. When everyone was given a weapon and everyone else was fully dressed, they left the shuttle/ They had landed several blocks from the Imperial Military Base.

“Have you done everything I asked?” Anakin asked the trooper, it coming out of the helmet to sound more like a demand.

“Yes, Lord Vader,” the clone responded instantly.

“Everything?”

“Yes, Lord Vader.”

“Good,” the former Sith then turned to look around his small group. “Trooper, you will take Master Yoda to the front of the Imperial Palace. Gather your supporters and make sure no one enters. Or leaves.”

“It will be done, my lord,” Cory nodded before pulling out a canister of some sort.

Anakin took it, pouring some of the contents in his hand, rubbing his gloves together. The group watched silently as the black glove was then pressed against the trooper’s armor. As he pulled away, Padmé saw that it left a large, black handprint. Black Hand. Turning next to Piett, he said, “Commander, you will take Senators Amidala, Organa, and the handmaiden to the Senate. Protect them with your life, Commander.” He pressed his hand against the greenish tunic.

“Yes, my lord.”

“But I want to come with you,” Padmé blurted.

“No,” Anakin snapped in an all too familiar way.

“But I—”

“Will be of no use to me when I face the Emperor. You are more useful revealing yourself to the Senate. They will surely listen to the words of a supposed dead woman,” his voice was wry. “Tell them of the corruption, or the treason within the Empire. They will follow me if they learn of the Emperor’s deceit,” he said, pressing his hand print on Bail and Dormé before stopping in front of her.

“I want to go with you,” she nearly whispered, trying one last time. She had a very bad feeling that if she did not go with him, somehow, Anakin would never return to her, only Vader.

“Go with them.” The voice speaking was hard, but the emotions wafting to her were soft, pleading. He was afraid. Afraid of losing her. He didn’t want her to get hurt, to put her at any more risk than what was needed.

A gentle hand came and pressed itself against her abdomen. The moment his hand was touching her, Anakin stiffened, and Padmé felt a spark go between something within her and him. Horrified, she realized that it was the twins. Did Anakin make connection with the twins? It was obvious that he had just felt something, but did he understand what it meant? This was not the time for such a revelation!

Withdrawing his hand, almost as if burned, the large man turned away from her, before making his mark on Master Yoda and Obi-Wan. “Kenobi and I will go to the Base and rally my supporters,” he went on stubbornly, not reacting to what had just happened. It felt as though a door had slammed shut in between them. Padmé could no longer sense him. He’d shut her out. She wasn’t sure if it was a good thing or not. “Once the Base is locked down, we will enter the palace through the tunnel system and I will face the Emperor. Are we all agreed?”

“We are with you, my lord,” Cory responded instantly. “Your people stand with you.”

“Good.”

And so, the group stood back and watched events unfold before them. Obi-Wan had signaled to the rebels, and it did not take long for the night sky of Coruscant to suddenly fill with flashes from above. Mon and Uton had not waited long to begin their attack.

As predicted, they watched as shuttles began pouring out of the Military Base, small crafts and TIE Fighters screaming out of the docking bays. The air space around the Base and the palace were soon closed off, and traffic was being desperately diverted. Bigger ships were then deployed and went sailing up into the atmosphere to help defend the capital.

Anakin gave a nod to the company, and they all began to go their separate ways. The clone moved and grabbed Master Yoda, putting him on his back, before rushing off towards the palace to defend it as instructed. The young commander, too, began corralling the senators and Dormé back to the shuttle so that they could meet at the Senate, leaving Obi-Wan and Anakin alone to wait until they were sure they could enter the Base.

The relatively still night had erupted.

“So it’s begun,” Padmé murmured, tightening her grip around the blaster in hand.

## 53. Opening the Floodgates

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As they stood still, watching the ships zoom out of the Base, Obi-Wan couldn't help the nervous tension that pulsed through him. He was concerned with the mission. He was concerned for the lives that would be lost. He was concerned for Anakin. Entering Coruscant had been like being dipped into an oil vat, the heavy, thick Darkness was suffocating. For a Jedi, it was toxic. But what was it like for his apprentice? Anakin was still so new to walking in the ways of Light. It would be so easy for him to relapse. Would he degeneration to his old self now that he was here, surrounded by everything he'd only recently left?

After waiting several lengthy minutes, the Jedi found himself become fidgety. Even after all this time, he couldn't rid himself completely of the habit. "There are still so many people at the Base on guard," Obi-Wan observed, watching as several troopers began filing out to stand guard. "I'm not sure we could get in without someone slipping away and ruining our plans."

"I had anticipated this," the rumbling voice of Vader responded as quietly as the mask allowed. "Another major diversion is the only thing that will draw them away."

Obi-Wan nodded thoughtfully. "You have a plan for this, I imagine?"

The mask of Vader stared down passionlessly at his master, and without a word, Anakin pulled something out of his utility belt for the Jedi to see. It looked like the control for a thermal detonator of some sort. Obi-Wan suddenly got a very bad feeling about this.

"What is that for?" he asked cautiously, eyeing the device distrustfully.

"Diversion," the younger man replied plainly.

"Wait—!" Obi-Wan reached out to take the device, uncertain about the consequences of this new plan, but it was too late.

The younger man didn't bother responding, and pressed down on the ignition. The Jedi stared at the Base, waiting in dread for something to happen. A second later, the ground shook and a thunderous BOOM! resounded across the Imperial City and beyond. Pain erupted within Obi-Wan's heart, like a punch in the chest, and he staggered backwards, turning around to peer out over the city, for it was not the Imperial Base that had been destroyed.

With tears in his eyes, Obi-Wan watched as thick black clouds of smoke billowed up into the sky from the angry flames that were now devouring the Jedi Temple.

"You... you destroyed the Temple," Obi-Wan gasped, shaking.

Even as he stared at the former Sith, Anakin either didn't seem to care or understand what he had just done. "I did," the younger man responded calmly.

"Anakin!" the Knight cried, feeling sick to his stomach as he watched the clouds of smoke roll ever higher up, blotting out the stars. "That was... that was a sacred place! A place where

all Force-sensitives could go to be at peace. It's stood here on Coruscant for a thousand years!"

"The main frame of the building should be salvageable," the former Sith replied dispassionately, having turned his attention from the building he'd just destroyed to instead watch the Base. "But for the mean time, it will serve us. Troopers and other Imperial personnel will be assigned to help put out the fires."

As he continued to stare at his apprentice in horror, Obi-Wan realized with a sinking feeling, that he was not as in control of this mission as he'd once thought. He'd always known that they would all have to trust Anakin and his people to an extent, but he'd always thought he'd have some power over the younger man. Now that the plan was in action and Anakin had once again adorned the suit of his old self, Obi-Wan was beginning to see how little he actually controlled.

"Control is an illusion, Padawan," Qui-Gon's voice whispered in his head.

Perhaps... but it's a comfortable illusion, Obi-Wan argued back silently.

But the point had been made. In this, there was little the Knight could do except go with the current of events. All his life the Obi-Wan had struggled with the concept of letting go. How many times had Qui-Gon lectured him about giving himself up to the Force? Of connecting to the Living Force? His master had been more skilled at such things; Obi-Wan had to work at them. This was a good exercise for him... the young Knight just wished the fate of the galaxy wasn't depending on this one mission as it taught him his lessons.

Watching safely from around the corner of a building, the two Force-users waited patiently for still more personnel to come pouring out of the Base. As Anakin had predicted, troopers and crewmen rushed out of the building to see what the tremendous noise had been. Within minutes, more ships and shuttles were deployed, racing towards the source of the explosion. They waited for a minute more after the last of the ships had gone before making a move. Soon, the two men straightened their newly acquired attire, before walking with purpose towards the Base.

While the Jedi was nervous, his apprentice exuded a sense of command and power, the likes of which Obi-Wan hadn't felt from him since before Tatooine. He was worried for Anakin, he truly was, but he had to place his trust in the Force... and in Anakin. Obi-Wan had done all he could for the boy, had trained him as best and as well as he could considering the time crunch and fighting against the young man's other instincts. Now it was up to Anakin. If his apprentice truly wanted to change, truly wanted to leave behind his Darkness, now was the time to prove himself. This was Anakin's test much more than Obi-Wan's.

When they came into sight around the Base, Storm Troopers instinctively raised their blasters in warning, only to lower them when they realized who it was stalking towards them. The closer they got, the lower the weapons became, until the clones were all but gawking at the former Sith Lord.

Without a word, the two new comers were able to walk right past the guards and into the Military Base. Glancing back without turning his head, Obi-Wan noticed that the clones had begun to follow them in, almost like dogs trailing after their master. The moment the black

boot of the former Supreme Commander hit the polished floor of the hanger bay, the entire bustling, panicked Base collectively stopped dead in their tracks.

They know that the master of the keep's returned, the Knight thought in awe, his mind straying towards the romantic. Never before had he seen such a response, not even after all his travels and missions to other worlds. Even being an evil Sith Lord, Darth Vader had also instilled in these people uncommon loyalty and awareness. Now the only question was, could Anakin yield such power and not be consumed by it?

Gasps echoed around the hanger as slowly, everyone became aware that the former Sith had truly returned. Eyes were wide, and everything became eerily silent, the only sound being the hissing of the respirator of Vader. They came to a stop in the middle of the hanger, Storm Troopers behind them, crewmen and officers before them. It put the Jedi Knight on edge, but Anakin only looped his fingers in his belt, waiting.

When enough people had unconsciously gathered around, the young man spoke in the commanding, infamous voice of Darth Vader, "There are traitors within the Empire that would seek the destruction of peace," the deep voice reverberated off the walls. "There is a conspiracy at work here. I have come back to stop it. Who will stand with me?"

Everyone remained deathly silent, no one wanting to be the first to speak up. Eventually, however, a middle aged man stormed forward, glaring. "Is this some sort of joke?" he sneered. "Darth Vader died weeks ago. This is some sort of rebel trick!"

"This is no trick," Obi-Wan stepped forward. "This is Lord Vader."

"Really?" the man scowled. "How do we know? This could just be someone they dressed up as Vader! If you are who you really claim to be, then prove—ahh... ack!"

The doubter's hands flew to his neck and he began claw at the invisible hand crushing his windpipe. The Jedi cast a glance over at his apprentice, finding Anakin's hand slightly raised, fingers spread in a pinching gesture. A wave of terror erupted throughout the congregants.

"I find your lack of faith disturbing," the former Sith sneered in delight.

Fear shot through Obi-Wan and he whispered for his apprentice's ears only a desperate warning, "Anakin."

That seemed to snap the young man out of the sadistic glee the Knight had felt slowly forming within his apprentice. "As you wish," he replied evenly, with a small wave of his hand.

The doubter was flung across the floor from the wave, and fell with a resounding thud. Everyone remained immobile and stared down at the now unconscious man. He was not dead, Obi-Wan could feel that, but that's not what it looked like. It was a powerful demonstration.

"Is there anyone else who has any questions?" Anakin asked, the threat hanging in the air unspoken.

Right away, from the back of the crowd, an officer rushed forward. "Forgive my lateness, my lord," he bowed his head. "But with the explosion, I was... detained."

"Is everything ready?" the former Sith asked instead of commenting on the admittance of guilt.

“Yes, my lord. I received confirmation that everyone else is in place.”

“Good. Now listen,” the giant in black called across the room. “There is corruption within the Imperial Palace. For the good of the Empire and its people, I am seeking to snuff it out. Permanently. You are all either with me or you are my enemy. Stand in my way, and I will not hesitate to destroy you.”

Only a Sith deals in absolutes, Master Yoda’s teachings screamed in Obi-Wan’s head, alarming him. Anakin was speaking and acting much more like a Sith again. Was he slipping into the Dark Side?

“Let go, Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon’s voice whispered.

But how can I? the Knight thought desperately. Hadn’t Qui-Gon also told him before that the Emperor could more easily be destroyed and that the challenge would be Vader?

“We are with you, my lord!” a Storm Troop cried from behind. With him, a cheer from all the other clones around the Base went up in agreement.

“And we are too!” a group of officers cried. There were a few, however, that remained quiet.

“Troopers!” Anakin called. “Protect this Base! No one gets in or out until I order it otherwise! If anyone returns, they must swear allegiance to me. If not, they are not to interfere. Imprison them, or shoot them, I do not care which.” The Jedi Knight paled, but understood in part.

“But Lord DuMont ordered—” a brave, foolish officer stepped up.

“Take him away!” the true Supreme Commander cried, and within seconds, troopers grabbed the other man to do as ordered. ‘You may all have to fight with your fellow officers, fellow troopers, but it is imperative for the safety and well being of the Empire that no one breeches this Base. Trust no one except if their leader has my mark!’ he pointed to the handprint on Obi-Wan’s tunic, before placing one on the lieutenant that had come forward. “This is war, internal though it may be. Do you understand?”

A great cry of excitement rang through the hanger, one that completely shocked Obi-Wan. Darth Vader had always had the reputation for instilling fear and terror. It was hard to image people cheering for him like this. It was hard to image that there were some that might actually like him.

But such thoughts were better left for later. At the moment, there was a mission to complete, an emperor to overthrow. So, when Anakin turned sharply, Obi-Wan felt obliged to follow. He noticed that the lieutenant began walking along side his leader as well, somehow able to match his pace.

“Report,” Anakin ordered.

“Everything has come together, my lord,” the officer repeated. “Lieutenant-Commander Piett and I were able to get the message you requested out to all the senators.”

“Good. And the moffs?”

“I let word slip to them as well. They should all be there.”

The black helmet nodded. "You have done well, continue to do so." It was interesting how a compliment could be so threatening. "I want you to stay here and protect the Base. No doubt with the explosion on the Jedi Temple, the Emperor and generals will be transporting men here to protect the palace and Base. It is your job to either turn them to fight for me or kill them. They must not enter at this point, Lieutenant. Not until my task is complete. Is that understood?"

"Clearly, my lord... But what of him, my lord," the officer eyed the Jedi with appropriate suspicion.

"Obi-Wan Kenobi, at your service," the Knight introduced himself with a tight smile, glad for something to pull him from his brooding.

The green eyes of the lieutenant widened considerably. "Obi-Wan Kenobi? My lord! This man is a Jedi Knight!" Both Anakin and Obi-Wan stopped to stare at the officer, impressed and confused as to how he knew this.

Apparently the young man understood and quickly explained, "I'd seen him once during the Clone Wars. I was just getting into the navy at that point."

"I am well aware of Kenobi's past, Lieutenant," Anakin snapped. "He is with me."

The lieutenant nodded instantly. "Yes, Lord Vader."

"Now do as I've instructed," the former Sith snapped as he stalked off.

Knowing he had to follow, Obi-Wan gave the other man another small smile, dipping his head, before rushing to catch up with his apprentice. There were so many secrets Anakin had kept from both sides with only commanding or asking trust in return. There were so many webs both Vader and Anakin had weaved. The Jedi Knight could only hope that they would not become tangled and he would not be betrayed in this.

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Riding on the back of a Storm Trooper was not something Yoda had done for at least four years. Not since the beginning of the Clone Wars when he'd believed that the troopers were on his side as he'd fought on Kashyyyk. Now it did not only seem inappropriate that he was in league with one, but the Grand Master felt vulnerable and tense. This man had been ordered to help him, to protect him, yet would he? Were there other ulterior plans that Vader had set up?

While Obi-Wan and Senator Amidala insisted that the young man who had organized this was Anakin, a good man, Yoda wasn't so sure, especially since entering into Coruscant space. The stench of the Dark Side permeated from everywhere. It was stifling, choking. There was no real escape from it. No matter how hard one tried to find peace and Light, it was not to be found on Coruscant. Not even the purity of the Jedi Temple could be sensed from here, so thickly was it covered in Darkness. This was truly the Sith's layer.

That being said, it would be so easy for the man who had been called Anakin to slip back into Darkness irrevocably. Everything was set, after all. If the Emperor was destroyed, what was to say that the allure of the Dark Side wouldn't seduce the boy again? What was to say that once his master was dead, that young man wouldn't claim the throne? Claim Sidious's

title of Master Sith? It would be so easy, all he would have to do was step forward and take it. There would be nothing stopping him.

Of course Yoda knew he couldn't let that happen if Vader was truly to return, and already the boy had shown some unpromising signs. Since adorning the suit, there was a real sense of fear surrounding the boy. That fear had spiked when he'd been arguing with Senator Amidala. In an environment such as this, that fear could only grow, become cultivated. The Emperor would surely use it against the boy, and it would be so much easier for Anakin to fall.

There was also a sense of Darkness around the young man as well. When onboard the Freedom, Yoda had harbored the hope that Anakin was really changing. There were occasional slips into darker thoughts and deeds, but nothing severe. He was still standoffish and rude, but really, it was a trait that had been seeping into the Jedi Order in the last days, the Grand Master had to admit privately. Such arrogance could usually be cleansed from an individual. With enough time and work, it could have been possible to do the same for Anakin.

But now Yoda feared that they would never get the chance to try. Darth Vader was returning, his presence whispering softly to Anakin, slowly winding his way back into the boy's mind. Had there been another way, the old Jedi would have never allowed Anakin to return to Coruscant. At least not until he had proven himself, for concern that the boy would relapse.

Suddenly, agony shot through the small Jedi, causing him to gasp, reaching for his heart. His vision blurred and he lost his grip on the Storm Trooper. He began to fall. The deafening BOOM! in the distance confirmed to the former Grand Master what he already knew.

Surprisingly, yet thankfully, the Storm Trooper turned and caught the Jedi before he hit the ground, even as it trembled under foot. Both turned to gaze out over the horizon. Yoda's heart broke as he watched flames greedily lick at the Jedi Temple, at the place that had been his home for nearly one thousand years. It was gone. The last link to the glorious past. The last link to goodness here. Gone.

Without realizing it, tears were streaming down the Jedi's face. He was crying. For the first time in many, many years, Yoda was crying. He had not allowed himself to do so when the Order had been destroyed, he'd not allowed himself to do so when it appeared all hope was lost because he wanted to believe that there still was a chance. But now, after all that time, after watching the last beacon of true hope crumble in flames, he wept silent, bitter tears. He was now forced to put all of his trust into one man. A man who had not shown any genuine trace of commitment towards their cause of rebuilding a Republic of Light.

"Don't worry 'bout that." Yoda peered up, finding himself surprised that he was hearing words of comfort from a Storm Trooper. "No one was inside there. And the surrounding area's been closed off since the destruction of the Jedi. No one should've gotten hurt."

"How...?" the Jedi Master asked, unable to say more, but not bothering to dry his tears, though his mind was still in shock. How could this have happened?

"Well, probably from the several tons of explosive's I placed around the Temple," the trooper explained in a too cheerful tone, lifting the old Jedi up onto his back once more.

"You?!" Yoda couldn't help but screech. "My home, that was!"



“It was just a building,” the clone responded, now sounding confused. “Buildings can be replaced.”

“My home, that was,” the Grand Master stressed, still feeling woozy and lightheaded. “Sacred, it was. So many memories... Friends long past...”

The trooper began shifting, obviously uncomfortable, but he shrugged. “Buildings can be replaced,” he repeated. “Besides, a real home is where your brothers are. You didn’t have any of your kind there. At least not anymore.”

Yoda frowned thoughtfully, taking the clone’s words to heart. There was a simple, brusque wisdom in what the trooper had said. What he had said was true, in essence, the Temple was just a building. There was a certain spiritual connectedness to the Jedi of the past there, to the Force, but they were all covered, smothered by the Darkness now anyway. And there were other places of such connection in the galaxy. One did not specifically have to come to Coruscant to feel the presence of the Light...

“It’s time to move on.”

The Jedi blinked, feeling strangely awed by the continued astuteness he was receiving from his companion. It was time to move on, to leave the past behind. Was that not one of the many lessons he’d taught others for so many years? To stay living in the past was just as dangerous as looking too far into the future. His friends, his students had gone, that was true, but their spirits lived on. They were part of the Living Force now. He should rejoice that they had moved on in their journey in the Force and found rest. They would not want him to wallow in grief at their passing and destroy himself as he had been for the past four years.

Yes. Yes, Yoda would move on. He would move on, because that’s what he should have done a long, long time ago.

“We’ve got work to do,” the trooper said rather awkwardly, unaware of the true wisdom he’d imparted or the Jedi’s own spiritual growth. Instead, he stood awkwardly, waiting for acknowledgement as he began his continuation towards the palace.

Silently hanging on, Yoda allowed his mind to marvel at the trooper that bore him. Clones had always seemed so... artificial to him. Obi-Wan and a few other Knights had had better relations with them, claiming that they had personality, but the Grand Master had never seen it. Since the betrayal of the Order, he’d believed them incapable of anything other than carrying out their orders. They were little better than computers to him. They weren’t real. Now...

Now he had to reevaluate his preconceived assumption. This trooper, CT-585 as he’s learned from his companion earlier, had shown in their short acquaintance that he had independent thought and personality. There was a sense of humor about him when he’d been first explaining the Temple’s destruction. He’d shown genuine concern when he’d realized Yoda was distressed. He’d comforted the old Jedi as best as he could. True, it had been a little stiff, but it had been sincere. There was a certain amount he was able to show because of his programming, but it proved that he was going learning to go beyond what he’d been designed to feel.

And Vader had known this. Somehow, somehow, Darth Vader had discerned that Storm Troopers were capable of much more than just what they had been bred to do. He somehow

had gotten to know that they could form attachments, personal loyalties. Loyalties that could override certain orders. That's how he had gotten the clones on his side. They were all loyal to him.

Things were changing, changing rapidly before Yoda's eyes. He was beginning to understand, beginning to see the unfailing confidence of Vader was not misplaced. The Sith had been arrogant, Anakin as well, because he could be. He knew everything that was happening, had set up plans so complex, yet so flexible, that everything he could do just had to work. While Sidious's talents had been foresight and cunning, Vader's was not just brute strength and power. The younger Sith had obviously been watching his master at work, perhaps without Sidious realizing to what extent.

This was all the more reason to watch the boy now. Everything was set up for not only his victory against his master, but for him to succeed him. Had Senator Amidala and Obi-Wan's influence really ever had any control on the boy?

At last, the pair came to the palace grounds. As predicted, it was under heavy guard since the rebel attack. Thankfully, most of the guards outside were Storm Troopers. "Halt!" one cried. "Identify yourself?"

The trooper Yoda was piggybacking came to a stop and answered simply, "CT-585."

"Orders?"

"I have orders to take control of the security around the palace. No one gets in or out."

"By whose authority?" an indignant officer came storming forward towards the new arrivals. "Who ordered this? And what the hell is that thing on your back?"

"This is Master Yoda," the clone introduced simply. "And my orders came directly from Lord Vader himself."

The confused night seemed to quiet around them. "That's preposterous!" the man cried, laughing. "Lord Vader is dead, Trooper!"

"I have orders to take command from Lord Vader," CT-585 repeated. "There is a conspiracy within the palace. There is to be no unauthorized comings or goings from within. Only those who bare Lord Vader's mark are allowed to give orders unless expressed otherwise."

Troopers' heads collectively swiveled to stare at the large black hand print on the white armor of their brother.

"This is preposterous!" the officer snorted, becoming angry. "Troopers, take this lunatic away!"

"I'm not lying. Lord Vader is here, on Coruscant, in the Imperial Military Base. And he's not happy," CT-585 added for good measure.

"Troopers!" the officer yelled, scowling fiercely as he turned to glare at his men.

The other Storm Troopers did not move.

"I gave you a direct order!" the man cried, sputtering in fury. "Take this broken piece of poodoo away!"

Still, the Storm Troopers did not move.

"By order of Supreme Commander DuMont, you are to do as I say! Take these things away!"

The other clones turned and looked over at each other, before two finally stepped forward. Yoda tensed, waiting to draw his lightsaber to defend himself and the clone. But instead of coming towards the new comers, the two clones grabbed their commanding officer and cuffed him. Yoda couldn't quite believe it.

"What are you doing?!" the man exclaimed in rage. "You're Storm Troopers! You have to do as I say! I order you to—"

Another trooper came forward and shoved something in the officer's mouth before tying a gag around, effectively silencing him. "Lock him in the office," the clone ordered. "The other officers too." It was done without hesitation.

"We need to spread everyone around the palace," CT-585 said once the officers were arrested and taken away. "Our orders are to keep everyone in and keep everyone else out. Reinforcements might be coming, so we must stop them from entering."

"How do we know what you're saying is true?" the trooper that had gagged the officer asked skeptically. 'I see the mark,' he nodded towards the handprint. "But that could be anyone's. And you're harboring a known Jedi fugitive."

"I have my orders," CT-585 argued. "I've seen Lord Vader myself. He's the one that sniffed out this conspiracy."

"There's no conspiracy."

"It's true."

Everyone snapped their heads to the side, watching as two elite troopers walked over to Yoda and his clone.

"What do you mean?" the spokesman for the undecided troopers asked sharply.

The two elites looked at one another before nodding. "The Emperor is harboring General Grievous."

A definite murmur ran through the Storm Troopers. Yoda could sense their angry confusion. This was not only a shock to everyone, the Jedi included, but it was exactly what was needed to spur the clones into action. Had Vader known about the cyborg, or was this happy coincidence?

"It's true," the other elite trooper called over his brothers grimly. "We've seen him ourselves. We were... ordered to assist him."

"Why?" CT-585 snapped.

"To cause disruption in the galaxy. It was Grievous who attacked the Royal House of Alderaan. It was Grievous who began attacking other settlements in the Empire."

“And we were forced to help on occasion,” the other admitted with disgust in his voice.

The angry murmurs became growls and shouts of fury. These men had fought a war to be rid of the Separatists. These men had died to rid the galaxy of its supposed enemies. To find out that your leader was somehow involved and cooperating with a traitor... that was a hard blow. The Jedi were enemies of the Empire, true, but the clones had not directly fought and died against them the way they had with the Separatists. To hear news of Grievous’s not only survival, but that he apparently had favor with the Emperor was not only devastating, but unacceptable.

“This is what Lord Vader must have seen!” CT-585 cried over the roars of rage. “He knew there was corruption within the palace! It was probably this same corruption that led to his attempted assassination!”

“That was the rebels!” one trooper called out.

“Are you sure?” CT-585 asked. Everyone went still. “If Separatists are involved, what’s to say they weren’t manipulating the rebels too? What’s to say that this is not all connected? Lord Vader is here, now, and he is going to solve this mess. He’s going to right the galaxy as it needs to be righted. He has found the root of all of this, and he’s going to destroy it. But he needs our help!

“Join us, brothers! Join us in fighting alongside a true man. A true leader! A man that does not plot with traitors and murders! Help us protect the Empire and as let me be witness to you all, you will be rewarded with full life, the life that the Emperor has forbidden for us!”

Yoda’s eyes widened in astonishment for what felt like the millionth time. Was this true? Had this really been accomplished? Had Vader really found a way to extend the lives of clones?

“Join us, brothers, in serving a man who has only ever had our best interests at heart! Join us in the protection of the Empire!”

A deafening cheer went up from the troopers, the name, “Vader!” their war cry. And without further delay, they all scrambled to set up defense around the palace. They worked quickly and efficiently, almost without need of direction. It was almost as though all of this had been planned out for them before. Perhaps it had, but for different circumstances. There was no clear way of ever knowing.

As the old Jedi watched the troopers work, he couldn’t help the sinking feeling he felt as he watched them prepare for battle with such fervent joy. He had hoped that few lives would be taken, but that was looking less and less likely all the time. These men were out for blood.

Turning around, eyes on the flames that consumed what had once been his home, straining to hear the sirens and cries from out around the city over the trooper’s, Yoda knew that tonight would be the final battle. Tonight he would either see the beginning of restoration, or the seal of darkness.

## 54. Unleash the Dogs of War

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The moment she was in the shuttle and Firmus had lifted off, Padmé was assaulted with questions from Bail and Dormé. The two became almost frantic, fighting to be heard over the other, until the younger senator just couldn't take it anymore.

"Shut up!" she cried angrily.

The uncharacteristic outburst was enough to effectively silence her two friends. She glared at them a moment, trying to organize her spinning head. With Anakin perhaps sensing the twins and her own dread about his reaction, her nervousness with their plans, and the sick feeling she had acquired due to Anakin shutting their link down cold, Padmé was in no mood for being interrogated. In fact, she felt torn over which she wanted to do more, to go and kill someone or just go lie down and cry.

"Let me explain, and please, be quiet," she began again, watching the frustrated, worried faces of two of her closest friends. "Yes, Anakin was really Darth Vader. When I was being held prisoner in the Imperial Base, I began seeing him act... strangely. I'd gotten to know him a little bit. I knew that there was something different about him. I witnessed him being kind at times.

"In the Battle Over Naboo, he saved my life. I'm still not sure what happened— other than the will of the Force—but I know he shielded me with his body as we crashed on Tatooine. He was seriously injured. I wasn't because of him. But together, we talked into the nearest town and were eventually found by his step-family. They took care of us until Obi-Wan came. At Tatooine Vader had been destroyed, and Anakin reborn. I saw it, and so did Obi-Wan.

"From there, you know the rest," she concluded her quick recap, refusing to tell any more. "We came to the Rebel Base, finished preparing our plan for this attack, and that's it."

The two rebels sat quietly for a moment, digesting, before Dormé leaned forward and took her friend's hand. "Are you sure he didn't do anything to you? He didn't... didn't mind trick you or something?"

"No," Padmé stated firmly.

"This is just fantastic," Bail laughed incredulously, finally exploding under the pressure. "Padmé, you've got that strange captive's syndrome. How can you really talk like this? He's obviously been lying to you, making you see things that aren't there. And because you believed him, that convinced Obi-Wan too! That man's Darth Vader!"

"Darth Vader is dead," the younger senator snapped, angry more at the uncontrollable events going around her than truly at her friend. She understood his doubts, but it was hers that she was having more trouble combating. "I watched him burn away."

And it was true. She'd watched as the horrid black suit had been burned in the fires of the escape pod. She'd watched her lover struggle and labor under the Tatooine suns. She's watched again as he agonized over his life, questioning long taught beliefs and look into

morality for the first time. It was at Tatooine that Anakin had truly found himself again, and the blackness of Vader had been unable to withstand the Light.

They were all quiet a moment, before the uncomfortable clearing of the throat in the front caught their attention. "Senator Amidala?"

Fighting back a sigh, the young woman went to the front of the craft. "Yes, Firmus, what is it?"

"I just wanted to inform you that everything has been taken care of. The message to the senators had been put out, and the message leaked to the moffs. Everything should work."

Padmé had to smile at the young man. It was strange how an Imperial could make her feel better when he friends couldn't. But then again, he wasn't just an Imperial. He was a human being. A living creature. Sometimes in the heat of war, one forgot that the other side was really just like them, only running under a different banner. "Thank you, Firmus. I'm sure it will."

The group stayed quiet until they finally landed at the Senate. It was getting late into the evening, and no doubt the others within were beginning to get antsy, wondering why they had been called. If this all worked, and Padmé had to keep telling herself it would, they would be one step closer to achieving their goal. Soon, there would be peace in the galaxy again. She just had to keep telling herself that Anakin was with her. He was not gone.

A tremendous BOOM! in the distance caught the attention of the group as they were walking into the Senate. They turned and stared at the considerable fire that had suddenly erupted in the distance, feeling the tremor it created even from here.

"What on Coruscant was that?" Bail breathed.

Looking surprisingly calm, Piett turned his head and continued on into the building, holding the door open for them. "The Jedi Temple."

"What happened?" Dormé asked, even as dread seeped into Padmé's stomach. "Did a ship crash into it?"

The Imperial officer now appeared uncomfortable, and instead of answering, he cleared his throat loudly. "This way. We've only got so much time."

The others followed the commander in, but Padmé lingered a moment, just staring at the blazing inferno in the distance. It had been Anakin. She knew it. Anakin had arranged for the Temple to be destroyed. She tried to reach out to him through their link, but it was cold and she could feel nothing. It was then that she was certain she needed to get back to him as soon as possible. Anakin needed her.

"Senator?"

Turning, the Naboo woman ran in through the door and met up with her friends easily, pulling up her hood. The group raced through the Senate, knowing that the others would be meeting. Already they could hear angry and confused cries coming from the senate chamber. They had to move quickly or fighting would likely begin. It had always amused Padmé how senators were some of the most groomed and intellectual beings in the galaxy, yet they could

easily come to blows over a disagreement as simple as they didn't like a proposal of a new law. Maybe Anakin had been right in his distaste for them...

When they entered the Naboo pod, Jar-Jar and the man that had temporarily replaced Padmé, and young man around her age named Donis, were surprised by the sudden intrusion. Without hesitation, Bail took control of the pod and floated it towards the center, apparently having come to terms as best he could over Anakin's identity, and knowing he had to stick to the plan.

"Please!" he cried, raising his arms up. "Please, may we have your attention!"

"Well, look who decided to come back," Senator Cortilla sneered once the room had fallen quiet, already steering her pod out into the open. "You're pretty brave, Organa. It's not every day we have a known traitor come into our midst."

Beside her, a gaunt, pale man easily recognizable as Grand Moff Tarkin scowled. "Indeed. Troopers, arrest him."

"Certainly," Bail agreed easily, "but before I do, I think you would like to hear this."

Knowing it was rather dramatic, but unable to help herself, Padmé pushed down her hood and waited as the angry cries slowly silenced as they all looked at her image that was projected overhead of the large screen. Staring out at her peers, waiting for them to still, the true Naboo senator began to speak.

"Senators. Moffs. Troopers," she addressed them all, noticing how the moffs had brought quite the contingent of Storm Troopers with them. No doubt wondering if they would have to arrest traitors after receiving the message that had gathered them all here. "I come back before you under the gravest of circumstances."

"This is impossible!" one man cried. "That woman cannot be Senator Amidala!"

"It's one of her handmaidens!" another cried.

Holding up her hands, Padmé was impressed that they all quieted instantly. They were obviously not only surprised, but awed and curious. "It is really me," she assured them. "Look at me. Hear my voice. I am Senator Padmé Amidala of Naboo. And I am here to tell you that the Empire is at great risk."

Shouts echoed through the dome, even as Grand Moff Tarkin floated the Coruscant pod towards the Naboo. "Lies!" he cried over the roar of the crowd. "This woman cannot be Senator Amidala. She died with Lord Vader. The only threat to the Empire is traitors like Organa!"

"I am not dead, and neither is Lord Vader," Padmé refuted calmly. The entire senate fell completely silent. "We were attacked, yes, nearly killed, yes, but we were not. We were able to crash land and have traveled far to get here. We came back because we have discovered a conspiracy within the Empire! A conspiracy that involves even its top leaders!"

"That is ridiculous!" Tarkin spat. Others began calling out similarly as well.

Everyone seemed to fall into argument either staunchly against the accusation or questioning it. This situation was collapsing more quickly than anyone of them had anticipated. Obviously they had not gotten here before the strict Imperials could stir up some

trouble. Looking around at her group, she saw Bail staring off with a grim expression, no doubt thinking of a way to get through to the people, while Dormé was looking around almost helplessly. Donis and Jar-Jar, she noted, were just gawking at her in amazement. Only Piett seemed active as he hunched over, listening to something coming from his comm-link.

“Listen! Listen!” Padmé cried, holding up her hands. “We have called you all here tonight to discuss this new found information!”

But no one was really listening to her, even now. Their apparently surprise at finding her alive was not enough to keep them silent it seemed. Everything began spiraling downward, when Piett stepped forward, taking control of the pod. Grabbing the data pad in Donis’s hand, the officer began hitting it against the side of the pod, much to the other young man’s displeasure.

The noise, however, was enough to get people’s attention, as well as the sudden movement from the Naboo pod. When everyone looked over and quieted, the Lieutenant-Commander straightened up a bit, staring out over the assembly with a remarkably bland, almost bored expression. He had an excellent sabacc face.

“That’s better,” he began mildly, knowing that his voice would be picked up. “I must urge you all to believe Senator Amidala. While her arrival here should be proof enough, I would, however, like to inform everyone that Lord Vader is indeed alive, and here on Coruscant.” A nervous ripple went through the crowd. “He is here because of the conspiracy Senator Amidala spoke of earlier.

“Apparently,” he went on before Tarkin or another moff could cut him off, “someone within the top ranks of the Empire is collaborating and working with the former Supreme Commander of the Droid Army, General Grievous.”

The murmurs grew louder with fear, but now the Strom Troopers added their voices to the mix, speaking up in harsh, angry tones. “All lies,” Tarkin said again, scowling at the younger Imperial. “And who might you be? Some rebel they dressed up to mock our uniform?”

“I am Lieutenant-Commander Firmus Piett. Lord Vader’s personal assistant,” the young man’s voice was strong and clear. “And I am no rebel. I speak for Lord Vader himself and bare his mark.”

Padmé was surprised at how well the teenager was able to speak, and admired his courage for doing so in front of such a large audience. But that admiration was dampened by the fact that General Grievous was alive. She had not known about this, had Anakin? Or had they really just discovered such damning treachery? Was this all some extraordinary luck, or had it all been planned?

“That could be anyone’s mark!” Senator Cortilla argued, looking slightly uncomfortable. No doubt she was wondering if she’d chosen the wrong side.

“It’s true,” Piett countered smoothly. “And I ask you, troopers, to believe me. Lord Vader needs your help. He knows there are traitors here, traitors that could very well be collaborating with Grievous. Help Lord Vader and Senator Amidala in their quest to protect and heal the Empire. Help them and be rewarded with full life, as was Lord Vader’s intention from the very beginning, but kept from you by moffs whispering to the Emperor.”



The cool, yet earnest plea was met with suspicious glances from senator to senator, moff to moff, while the troopers continued to stare forward at the Naboo pod. Once more, Padmé was surprised by the revelation of slowing the clone aging process. Was that just a promise to find a way, or had a solution already been found? Again, was this just a bribe, or was this a firm, established vow?

Whatever it was, if a cure already existed or if this was just an oath to find one, it would serve as a powerful tool. She knew from talking to Cory how much the troopers adored and trusted Vader, and if this was true, and the troopers took the first step into believing all that they said, there would be nothing stopping them. This entire coup might just proceed without anyone even realizing what happened. The senator could only hope that would be the case.

When nothing happened, however, Tarkin's cruel laugh echoed off the pods and around the senate chamber. Everyone else remained still and silent. "You see?" the governor sneered. "They are not so brainless as to believe your lies. Troopers," he called on the clones around the room, "arrest those traitors. And detain the senators for questioning."

A moment went by, and then another, but still the clones did not move. Padmé looked out around her, realizing with a growing sense of hope that perhaps they had gotten through to them after all. They were remaining neutral at the moment. They needed something else to push them over onto their side.

Stepped forward, the Naboo senator called out, "Troopers! I am alive, and so is your Supreme Commander! Will you not help him? Will you allow General Grievous to entrench himself here? Allow the moff traitors to destroy all you've worked so hard for?"

All around the room, the eerie sound of blasters charging up could be heard. There were enough troopers that the slight noise became a steady hum. They had made their decision.

Without a word, all around, troopers began pointing their blasters at not only the moffs, but the senators as well. Tarkin began yelling in protest and fury, as did others. Those clones that were not in pods took up station around the doorways, ensuring that no one would get in. Or out.

"Senator Amidala," the trooper in Tarkin and Cortilla's pod spoke up. "We are with you. What are your orders?"

Relief spread through the young woman, and she couldn't help close her eyes a moment and exhale the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "Take the moffs to the prison holds," she commanded. "Watch the senators. They are not to be harmed, but hold them in the cafeteria together. No one leaves. No one gets out."

"You heard her, men!" the spokesman of the clone called. All around, a cry went up from the troopers, and they began arresting the moffs and motioning for the senators to follow them. It was all going smoothly for a moment, it was all going exactly as planned.

Until an alarm went off.

Everyone stopped, looking around as blaring sirens and flashing lights enveloped the room. "Someone's tripped the alarm," Bail looked around, confused.

"But who do they think is going to come?" Dormé frowned. "The troopers are on our side now."

Her question was met a moment later when blaster fire suddenly erupted around the room. Everyone fell down, getting into cover. Some weren't so lucky, however. Screams broke out, cries and calls from all around only added to the sudden chaos of events. After the intense situation had seemed to come to a close, the gates of hell had suddenly once again been released.

Peeking up over the top of the pod, blaster tightly in hand, Padmé got the answer. "Battle droids."

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Cory put away his comm hoping that the others got his message about General Grievous. He knew Piett had, as the young officer answered, but he wasn't so sure about Pilon or Lord Vader. He wasn't so worried about the Sith, considering the man had definitely faced worse, but he was concerned for his other friend at the Base. Arlo was more of a thinker than a fighter.

But there was no time to worry about that. He had his own problems, the chief of which was scowling up at him. "No," the trooper said for what felt like the millionth time. "We have our instructions."

"Help, they will need, if General Grievous is here," Master Yoda argued right back. "Warn them, we must."

"Lord Vader said to guard out here. There will be others coming," he scowled under his helmet. "They can handle that old cyborg."

"Changing are the dynamics of this mission. Stirring the Force is."

"We were ordered to defend the palace out here," the trooper snapped. "I don't disobey orders."

The two faced off a moment longer before the small Jedi began staring at him intently. It made the clone feel uncomfortable, and a strange sensation came over him. "Follow me inside, you will," a voice said, and a warm, sleepy feeling washed over the trooper.

"Maybe I should follow you inside," Cory said, and suddenly found himself wondering why he'd been so against it a moment ago. Clearly it was a good idea.

"Leave instructions for others, you will. Warn Obi-Wan and Vader we will."

"I'll have to leave instructions for the others before I come with you to warn Knight Kenobi and Lord Vader."

And without another thought, Cory turned and began giving his instructions to his brothers. The other clones were troubled that the two were leaving, concerned about the possibility of being confused in telling who would be an enemy and who would be an ally. But the solution was a quick fix, however, and Cory made sure that Master Yoda left his hand print on the other troopers' armor, it being hard to replicate the tiny clawed hand. Only those following Lord Vader would wear a mark.

With that taken care of, and when things had been settled between them, and everyone knew what they were supposed to be doing, Cory began following Master Yoda into the

palace. It was only when they were at the door that the clone realized what happened. Stopping dead in his tracks, Cory spun on the old Jedi, furious. “You mind-tricked me!” he cried.

For the first time that the clone had seen, amusement lit up the Jedi’s large eyes, and a nasty sort of smirk came onto Yoda’s lips. “Too late now, it is, to turn back.”

Once more the two glared at each other, for only a moment before Cory burst out laughing. While he was not normally one to like being bested, he had to admit, the situation was funny. He’d seen Lord Vader use the trick before, and knew that Master Yoda must have made him sound like an idiot, giving him ideas that weren’t his own. It was lucky—for Yoda that is—that Cory was a good sport, or else the trooper would have been hard pressed not to blast off the Jedi’s head. Very lucky.

“Guess so,” he agreed after a minute. “Well, let’s get to it then. Stay close. I’ll go first.”

And together the unlikely duo entered into the palace. Cory wasn’t really sure what he was supposed to be looking for, or who to watch out for, but his training as well as instincts told him that anyone and everyone could be a traitor. Anyone and everyone could negatively affect this mission. If there was going to be any hope of success at all, they were going to not only have to fight together, but would have to watch each other’s backs carefully.

Soon enough a servant came around the corner. The woman’s eyes widened comically as she saw the Strom Trooper and Jedi stalking around, weapons drawn. Instantly, Cory trained his blaster on her. “Make a sound and it’ll be your last,” he growled.

To many, it might have been an ideal threat, but clones meant them. Troopers only looked at the grand scheme of things. Knowing that they were not good with the small details, they tended to leave that up to the higher ups to figure out. That being the case, the majority of individual lives they came across were insignificant until told otherwise. One person did not truly matter in the grand scheme of things, and even though the family would be grieved, who else really cared? Not the troopers, who had quickly become disenchanted with other beings that looked down on them.

The woman, barely out of her childhood, nodded slowly, before carefully setting down the tray she’d been carrying, holding up her hands. As if she would have a weapon anyway. “Step over there,” Cory instructed, jerking his blaster in the direction he’d meant.

As the girl did, the clone keeping his blaster on her, turned towards his companion. “Tie her up.”

The Jedi stared up incredulously. “There is no need.”

“She might squeal on us if we don’t. It’s best to eliminate her as a threat.”

The other snorted in disgust. “Shoot her, then. Better it would be,” Yoda said with obvious sarcasm.

Unfortunately, in such situations, trooper’s were not prone to understand such inflections, and when in battle mode, took requests and commands literally. “If you think that’d be better,” Cory replied, raising his blaster, aiming it at the girl’s forehead.

The clone didn't see Yoda's horrified face. All the trooper focused on was his target. He watched as the girl's face drained of color, before her eyes rolled back into her head and she fainted. Gracelessly, she hit the floor with a loud thump. She did not move again.

Lowering his weapon, the trooper beamed under his helmet. "That'll work!" he laughed, before walking forward and tying her up. Just in case. He did not sense the Jedi Master glaring eyes behind him, burning holes in his armor.

Instead, he turned back to his companion, and motioned for the green creature to follow. The palace, as far as Cory was concerned, was too quiet. He'd only been inside a handful of times, at least in the main sections, but even he knew this was not right. The guards that had always been posted outside each door were gone. The Royal Guard, too, were missing. There were not advisors walking around, barking orders. There was nothing. Just stillness.

It wasn't right. Tension creeped into the trooper's body, warning blaring in all of his senses. Something was going to happen. Something bad. Just as sure as he was a clone, he knew that at any given moment, something was going to explode in his face. Chancing a quick glance down, Cory knew that the Jedi could feel it too.

Turning another corner, weapons ready, the two invaders got their answers. The moment they stepped out from around the corner, Cory pushed Yoda back around into safety before flinging himself back as well. For around the corner, probably courteous of General Grievous himself, were a host of battle droids.

Shots instantly filled the once silent corridor, and the trooper and Jedi had to move away, lest a blaster bolt bounce around the corner and hit them. The momentary surprise was not wholly unexpected, but it was also dangerous. They had given up ground in the unprepared attack, and because of that, droidekas came rolling after them.

Without a second thought, Cory grabbed a nearby table, an expensive looking antique, and flipped it over. It would certainly not hold up for very long, but judging from the material it was made of, it would be enough to cover them while they searched for an escape route and shoot back. And even if it wasn't... well, it was their best shot.

Not hesitating, Master Yoda came out from behind their meager shelter and began deflecting the bolts being shot at them back to the droids. Of course the blasters were deflected by the shields around the droids, but it was better than the table getting hit or them. So while he let his partner deal with the droid for the time being, knowing the Jedi could handle himself, Cory looked for something to help them.

Smirking beneath his helmet, the clone shouted over the noise, "Cover me!" And not stopping, ran towards the other side of the wall, to the supply closet that he hadn't noticed on the way over. An error on his part. But thankfully they were near, because as ordered by Lord Vader, the clone had managed to hide a few surprises throughout the palace. Just in case.

Once opening the door, the trooper went to the back of the closet and smashed open a panel. Inside were controls that opened a hidden door. It was something that the Emperor had ordered be placed in to keep weapons and the like in case of emergencies. What the Emperor did not know was that his apprentice had changed all of the codes and locked out everyone except those loyal to him. So, typing in the correct sequence rapidly, Cory was able to get inside.

Taking what he needed, he then ran back to the opening. "Get in here!" he called to the Jedi Master.

The green creature made no reply, but quickly backed away from the advancing droids. The moment he was within arm's length, the trooper grabbed the Jedi and pulled him in. "Plug your ears," he instructed bluntly, as he turned around the corner a bit, throwing two thermal detonators.

After only a heartbeat, the sound of the explosions shook the palace. The sound was so loud, that even Cory's helmet couldn't muffle out all of the noise. Without thought, he wrapped his arms around the smaller being, protecting him as best as he could as parts of the ceiling were shook loose, and the side of the door were torn away.

In a matter of seconds, everything was still. The droids had been destroyed.

Cory released Yoda, setting the startled Jedi down, before peeking around the corner. True enough, there was very little of the droids left. Their shields hadn't been strong enough to withstand the detonators. And with that in mind, the trooper went back to the supply closet and began grabbing all the detonators he could, as well as anything else he believed would help them as they stalked through the palace. "Here," he shoved a few detonators at the Jedi. "Hold on to those."

And once they were fully supplied, an extra blaster strapped to his back, as well as several other nasty little surprises, the trooper walked out from behind their sanctuary. Taking in the carnage before him, all the twisted metal from the droids and the blown-out walls, Cory nodded in satisfaction. Everything was going exactly as Lord Vader predicted.

"This is CT-585," Cory spoke into his helmet, comming his men outside. "Droids are in the equation. Watch your backs out there. Some might get past us and attack from behind."

"Roger that," AR-1004 answered. 'But we have another problem out here.' Cory waited grimly for the other to elaborate. "The 367th division is on its way. They have orders to attack us, Sir."

The trooper swore viciously. "Do what you can to turn them to our cause. They need to see that they're on the wrong side."

"And if they don't, Sir?"

Cory was silent a moment. He hated to give this order, hated it more than anything else, but he knew what had to be done. He would not jeopardize this mission. "Shoot them down if you have to. We cannot fail."

There was only the slightest bit of hesitation before AR-1004 replied, "Yes, Sir."

And with that, their conversation was over. Thinking back, CT decided it would be a good idea to send out another warning to everyone. "CT-585 to Senator Amidala?" There was no reply. "Cory to Padmé?"

Nothing.

A sinking feeling entered the trooper's gut, but he knew he could not give in to it. He had to stay focused. "CT-585 to Pilon. Do you read me?"

The comm. was answered, but only for a moment. Cory could hear what sounded like shouts and blaster fire. Pilon didn't respond, but the clone could hear heavy breathing, before his friend's voice shouted, "Fall back! Just around—Kriff!"

The line was cut.

Dread surged through the clone, a feeling he'd never really experienced before. His friends weren't answering. Pilon was actually in a fight. Should he even bother trying to contact Lord Vader? From the sound of everything, his friends already knew about the use of the droids.

"Go, we must," Master Yoda's soft voice tore the clone from his spiraling thoughts. The trooper actually jumped. "Help Obi-Wan and Vader, we must."

Swallowing down his panic, Cory pushed aside his feelings and once again entered the trooper mentality. He had a job to do, and by the Force, he would see it done. There was much more at work here than just himself and his friends. Even though he was just a clone and couldn't really see it, he knew he had to play his part. Now was not the time for second guessing and hesitation. If he wanted to survive, if he wanted his friends to survive, he had to do his part.

Nodding, once again cold and detached, the trooper began walking. "This way."

Once more, he was little better than a machine. There were no feelings, no worries. He was cold, he was calculating, and he would do his job. For the time being, he was not Cory, he was CT-585. He was not a friend, he was a warrior. He could not afford to worry about his friends or despair over the thoughts that soon his brothers might be locked in battle against each other. He was a Storm Trooper of the Imperial Army, serving directly under Lord Vader. He would not let his leader down.

He was only a weapon, a tool, and he would do as he had been bred and designed to do: To unleash chaos and destroy any who got in his way.

## 55. Confrontations

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Obi-Wan had a bad feeling about this. All of it. While he had been in plenty of seemingly hopeless situations before, had fought and come out on top against the odds, all of his past experience seemed insignificant and juvenile compared to the mission he was on now. Not only was he part of a coup that would—hopefully—overthrow the Empire, but he was working with his old enemy-turned-apprentice that he still wasn't even sure he could trust completely.

To say that the Jedi Knight was nervous was a grand understatement of dynamic proportions.

"Do you even know where the Emperor is?" he couldn't help break the silence. He needed some sort of sound other than the eerie respirator of Vader as they walked through deserted halls.

"Yes."

Frowning at the unhelpful answer, the Knight knew he would not be getting anything else from the former Sith. Apparently Anakin still had some sort of connection to his old master. Perhaps that was what was leading him to Sidious? It was hard telling. It could either be a connection or as simple as his apprentice knew where the Sith Master would be in a crisis such as this. Obi-Wan hoped it was the latter, unnerved by the idea that the young man was still connected to the Emperor.

The customary silence fell over the two, the respirator hissing away, unsettling the Jedi. Jedi calming techniques seemed completely lost on Obi-Wan at the time, and he just couldn't seem to still his rapidly beating heart. Nothing he did could calm him, he couldn't get his mind away from the tormenting 'what ifs' that rolled around in his brain.

"No matter what happens, I am to face the Emperor alone," Anakin's booming voice startled his master from his thoughts.

"What?" Obi-Wan frowned. "No. I can't let you face him alone. What if you need help? I cou—"

"No," a too Vader-like hiss escaped the young man. "I will face the Emperor. You are to deal with anyone... or anything else."

There was a slight pause as the sinking feeling in the Jedi's stomach only worsened. "Something?" he repeated steadily.

Of course Anakin didn't reply, merely kept his maddening pace towards the Emperor. Again, Obi-Wan was struck with doubt towards his apprentice. What was Anakin's real goal? What did he really want? Was he truly just seeking to kill his master, or did he want Sidious's throne as well? The young man knew that the Rebels had little choice but to follow him, was he just using their desperation against them? Was he hinting at a common threat or a threat he had set up for Obi-Wan?

The Knight was about ready to talk himself into a panic when the former Sith suddenly stopped. It was only then that Obi-Wan felt the waves of uncertainty coming from the boy. Why would Anakin feel uncertain? Since meeting him properly, the Knight had never sensed anything except the utmost assuredness from the boy. Was he second guessing himself now? Was he afraid of the Emperor?

No, no that couldn't be. When the boy's thoughts turned towards his former master, Obi-Wan knew there was nothing but black hatred and the need of revenge there. Anakin was not scared of facing his old master. He wanted to face Sidious, wanted to kill him, wanted to destroy the Sith so completely that no one remembered his name. So what could have struck the normally sure man hesitant?

"If something were to go wrong..." Anakin trialed off, struggling to put into words his thoughts. Obi-Wan did not mind. He waited patiently, wanting his apprentice to realize that he could always come to the Knight, that Obi-Wan was truly his ally in all things.

"If something were to go wrong," Anakin repeated more firmly, resolved to speak, "I want you to get Padmé away from here."

The Jedi found his eyes widening slightly. "Away? What do you mean?"

"Away!" the younger man snapped, angry fear entering his voice. 'I don't care where, but you must get her away from here.' There was a tense pause between the two before the former Sith added quietly, "Keep her safe."

Understanding filled Obi-Wan instantly. Despite how odd it was, how improbable, the man formerly known to the galaxy as Darth Vader truly and deeply cared for Senator Amidala. He loved her. The Jedi had seen it before, but he was sure of it now. So sure that it gave him the hope he needed. Sure because Anakin would not want to leave Padmé, and Padmé would not want Darth Vader. Right now, the young man was preparing for his own biggest 'what ifs'. If he were to fail, he wanted Padmé safe.

Smiling, despite their rather grim circumstances, despite the fact that the boy had blown up what had been his home, Obi-Wan found himself feeling warmed by the love the former Sith held that he was so desperately trying to bury away so that no one could tell. "I will," he promised solemnly. "But I'm sure I won't need to."

The mask of Vader stared down at the Jedi for only a beat, before he turned away, and Anakin was once again marching away. His strides became faster and faster, forcing the Jedi to have to jog to keep up with him. They were entering a tunnel system, an elaborate labyrinth designed for escape as much as confusion to enemies deep under the Imperial Base and in between the palace. It was completely dark in the tunnels, and the only hope of guidance was Anakin. It was more than an intimidating situation.

Keeping close to his apprentice, barely able to distinguish him from the rest of the blackness that enveloped them, Obi-Wan found himself sweating. Something wasn't right. The Force was screaming at him that something was going to happen. The Knight looked around and above him, but saw nothing. Nothing but blackness.

If there was another way in or out of here, it was well hidden, even from Jedi senses. But the feeling of foreboding did not leave Obi-Wan as he tried to scan the area. He was about to



ask Anakin if he sensed anything, when he realized that the boy was gone. All he could hear was the distant sound of a respirator as its hiss echoed off the walls. Anakin was gone.

A chill so powerful ran through the Jedi, leaving him momentarily frozen in place. “Anakin?” he called, but there was no reply. The respirator hiss becoming quieter and quieter.

The Force was still screaming, warning, but Obi-Wan could not tell for what. Forcing himself to think, to remain as calm as possible, the Knight thought back to his Temple days, of when Master Yoda and Qui-Gon would blindfold him and practice stretching out with his senses in training. The eyes could fool you, they could not always be trusted.

With that in mind, Obi-Wan grabbed his lightsaber and activated it. The blue light shown against the grey tunnel walls, giving the area an even colder feeling. It wasn’t the best light, but it was all he had, so cautiously, the Jedi continued forward. He reached out with his senses, willing the Force to show him the way Anakin had gone. Frighteningly, it did not, just kept warning him of upcoming danger.

Was this what Anakin had meant when he said ‘anything’ else that might distract the former Sith from fighting the Emperor? This maze was dark and oozed with the Dark Side of the Force, so were their hidden traps? Was there someone here, watching him?

Humming in confirmation, the Force quieted. There was someone here with him. Where there traps? Yes, of course there were. Someone had set them. But who? Was it one of the Imperial Officers? No. That wasn’t right. It was someone else. Someone more... powerful? Yes, yes someone... someone...

The Force shrieked in warning, and instinctively, Obi-Wan rolled backwards, way, before popping back up, ready and waiting for a fight. The answer to all his questions had fallen from above before him. The Jedi watched in horror as slowly, something rose up from its ominous crouching position. Blue and green light clashed poisonously together against the walls, somehow closing off the space, making it feel much smaller and more sinister than it had before. The sound of machine mechanisms sounded, mingling with the dangerous hum of ‘sabers.

With wide blue-green eyes, Obi-Wan began shaking his head, unable to grasp what he was seeing. It couldn’t be! This was not possible.

Anything is possible, Qui-Gon’s voice echoed distantly in Obi-Wan’s mind, and he knew the truth.

“General Grievous,” the Knight breathed in both shock and horror.

His only reply was the sadistic, gravelly laugh that bounced off the walls mockingly back to the stunned Jedi.

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The Force was sending him warnings, resonates of the danger he had just walked away from, but Anakin did not stop. He had sensed General Grievous’s presence the moment Piett had warned him of an unidentified shuttle. It had surprised the former Sith greatly, but only for a moment. That surprise was swiftly replaced with burning rage and hatred.

His master had lied to him. Again. He had promised Anakin that the cyborg had been taken care of. But it was only now that the younger Sith realized how stupid he'd been for believing Sidious would tell him the truth about anything. Of course his master had 'taken care of' Grievous, taken care to hide him to betray his apprentice.

Kenobi could handle Grievous, Anakin was sure of it. While the Jedi was a little too jumpy at times, he was a decent fighter, and quite skilled. The older man was, after all, the only Jedi to have faced Darth Vader twice and lived. Granted, both times Anakin had been distracted with more important things than just killing off one more Jedi, but still. Kenobi had lasted quite a while against Vader, and that was impressive.

So, with Kenobi taking care of the remnants of the past, Anakin focused all his attention on what he was doing now. He could not afford to be distracted. He did not feel guilty for abandoning the Jedi, just as he did not feel guilty for not warning his other people about the cyborg. Grievous wouldn't even affect anyone else if Kenobi did his job, so it didn't really matter.

Kenobi would not fail to take out the cyborg. Nor would he fail in keeping his promise. Unbiddenly, Anakin's mind wandered to Padmé. While he was glad she was not here at the Base or in the palace, he still did not like that she had come at all. But where could he have really kept her? The rebel ships were now fighting for their lives and would most likely all be destroyed unless little one-man fighters managed to get away. Outside of the Base and palace would certainly erupt into a warzone when mass confusion finally exploded. And there was no way Anakin would let her anywhere near the Emperor. Sidious would certainly not ignore her presence, and the younger man could not afford to get distracted and worry about protecting her. Should the Emperor learn of his true feelings, if her knew anything, Padmé would be in very great danger, and Anakin was not sure what losing her would do to him.

But there was something else, too, that bothered him as his mind thought of the senator. She had changed. Was changing. There was something going on, she knew, but would not tell him. Before they had all gone their separate ways, he had... felt something. The Force was with her, such a bright, brilliant Light that it was almost painful. It wasn't her, yet it was. He knew what it was, deep down, and yet the answer would not become clear in his mind. It was... it was...

No. There was no time for this. Kenobi would not fail him. In anything. It was useless to get caught up in all of the worries and scenarios that could or could not come into being. Right now he had to guard himself, body, mind, and soul. There was no one with him anymore. There was no one to worry about. There was no one to get hurt. Padmé would not be hurt.

Slamming his mental shields tightly shut, making sure that nothing could leak out to serve his master, Anakin was pushed far back inside himself and Vader slowly began crawling into the forefront of his mind.

A few minutes later, there was hardly anything left of the caring man that had been Anakin. In his stead, Darth Vader had returned, and from out of the blackness of the tunnels, the former Sith lord emerged. When entering the palace proper, he could sense growing tension just outside. The clone troopers were getting excited, and there was fighting going on within the palace. A droid attack, most likely, but the man in black did not stop to see what

was happening or to lend assistance. Instead, he marched to the Throne Room, where he knew his master was waiting.

Royal Guards stood outside the large doors, their red helmets gleaming under the light. They stiffened in surprise at the Sith they believed to be dead, but Vader did not stop or slow. Without a trace of pity, he reached out to the Force and crushed their windpipes. The two men fell to the floor an instant later, dying without a fuss.

With a powerful surge of the Force, the massive doors were blown open. Eight Royal Guards were instantly alert, pikes ready to take on the sudden threat. With a flick of his wrist, Vader grabbed them all with a Force hold and threw them against the wall. The unnerving sound of bones snapping and breaking could be heard, but the former Sith did not even bother to slow his stride, nor did he even look to see what damage he had actually done.

Instead, Vader strode right up to the throne. The Emperor sat there calmly, merely raising a brow at the sight of his lost apprentice. There was no surprise, no moment of uncertainty within the old man. He had known. He had known that Vader would return. He had foreseen it.

“Welcome back, Lord Vader,” Sidious greeted rather neutrally. “When I sensed the wave of chaos I knew it had to be you.”

Vader said nothing, just stared at his old master. For a moment, the former Sith studied Sidious, willing himself to feel any amount of loyalty that might still remain for the man that had taught him everything. Willing himself to ally with the Emperor again. An overwhelming sense of duty nearly had the younger man on his knee, bowing before the Sith Master, as he had done for most of his life. But the desire to do so was not truly his own. He could feel his master’s Force suggestion slamming into his mental shields. It was almost desperate. The Sith was trying one final attempt to force his apprentice back into submission.

Hatred flared within Vader and his terrible snarl was hidden beneath his mask. Without a word, he activated his lightsaber, the glowing promising death. He would not be subjugated again.

A black sneer marred Sidious’s face as his putrid yellow eyes burning with hate. The scowl that split his face was more hideous than Vader had ever seen it. “Very well then,” the Emperor nodded, voice deadly even.

The two glared at one another, each waiting for the other to make the first move. Had he been younger, more foolish, Vader would have leapt at his master in an instant, not waiting for anything. But he was not that young, impulsive boy anymore. He had been well trained, and suffering had been his teacher. He would wait for Sidious to make the first move, and when he did, Vader would better understand the rhythm of the battle, and be able to manipulate it.

In a split second, the Sith Master had his lightsaber out and activated, leaping at his apprentice with a terrible cry. Ready for the sudden strike, Vader was able to block. The amount of force behind the attack, however, caught the younger man off guard slightly. As a rule, Sidious had never sparred with his apprentice. The older man never wanting his pupil to know his fighting style, his strength or any weaknesses that may be found.

But that mattered very little. Vader was confident he would win in the end. Hundreds of times he'd encountered and killed powerful Jedi Masters. He'd killed Darth Maul, and even Count Dooku despite his youthful stupidity. In all of these battles, all between opponents he knew little to nothing about, he had come out as victor. Sidious, of course, was more powerful than his previous foes, but Vader refused to lose. Sidious would fall, and the younger man would do anything it took to kill him. He would see to it that Sidious was dead, even if he had to kill himself to do it.

The two powerful Sith lords quickly exchanged blow after blow with each other, neither being able to penetrate the other's defense. Sidious was quick, much quicker than Vader had suspected, but it was of little concern. His master was old, in any case, and Vader was still young. He was more powerful, and they both knew it. The Emperor would come at his apprentice hard and fast, knowing that if the fight were drawn out, he would ultimately be defeated. So that was Vader's strategy. He would play the game.

The battle quickly became feverish as the two titans attacked one another viciously, neither holding back. Unlike the practice sparring he had done with Kenobi, this fight was not fluid, not a dance. It was not beautiful. It was frenzied, chaotic. Moves were sharp and deadly, precise yet choppy. They constantly changed tactics with one another, neither completely obeying one fighting style. This was not a dance, it was a sprint, a sprint to see who would finish and who would be dead.

As they fought, Vader could feel his master's mind probing, constantly hammering away to break his mental shields. It was so strong, the younger man wondered how his master could do it while also in such a laborious physical battle as well. Vader tried to push back, unused to such strong intrusion while fighting, raging against his master's mind. One small crack would be enough for the Sith to break him. One tiny crack, and Sidious would know everything.

"Your powers are weak, Lord Vader," his master spat in disgust when they were locked together, each pushing against the other, hoping the other would break. "I sense much confusion in you."

With a growl, Vader shoved hard, sending his master stumbling backwards, but the older Sith recovered in time to block the younger man's attack. The former Sith did not reply, instead, pressed harder and faster than he had before, the suit restricting his movements slightly.

"They've corrupted you," Sidious went on, his voice like poison upon the younger's ears. "They've made you weak. I sense the Light in you," he sneered.

Frustration gnawed at the young man's mind. Frustration and a small amount of acceptance. He had always known the Light was weaker than the Dark Side. He had known that when he agreed to practice the Light Side of the Force with Kenobi. At the time, he'd told himself it might just be more powerful, or it was at least something to learn, to catch his master off guard. But now that he was here, struggling against Sidious, Vader wasn't so sure. He tried to draw upon the calm that Kenobi had taught him, tried to find the peace in his center that he'd slowly been able to grasp for small amounts of time, but he was failing. Here, in practical use, he was failing.

Anger flared within Vader at the realization. He was failing. He could not fail! He refused to do so! Subconsciously, his feelings shifted, his mind went to the Darkness, tentatively

tapping into its power once again. The moment he did, he felt the black energy pulse through him, nearly engulfing him, welcoming him back coldly.

Sidious smiled, even as he flipped away, out of the younger man's reach. "Yesssss," he hissed. "Good. Only your hatred can destroy me!"

Enraged, confused, and so very angry, Vader leapt at his master. There was no time to think, thinking would only slow him down. He had to feel. Sidious wanted to see his hatred? Vader would show him! He would overwhelm the older Sith, crush him until there was nothing left!

A small part of the young man, the part that was still Anakin, screamed in warning. Begged him to turn back from the dark path, showing images of Padmé. But Vader didn't listen. What did Anakin know? What did any of them know? There was only one way to kill the Emperor, and it was not by backing off and allowing the bastard to have a chance!

Vader fell deeper into the Dark Side, the cold churning power pulling him deeper and deeper into its depths. He was drowning, he knew, yet it just was not in him to pull out, to breathe in the Light he found so intoxicating. Nothing else mattered. There was only one thing Vader wanted now, and that was revenge. Revenge for all the lies, for the torture, for the abuse. And he would have it.

Sidious must have sensed the change, because he faltered for half a second. But that was enough for Vader to use to his advantage. Stopping mid-swing, the younger Sith changed direction and cut upwards. Unfortunately, the Sith Master had regained his awareness and was able to spin out of the way of the strike that would have severed his arm. Instead, he was merely cut by the crimson blade.

The smell of burnt flesh and the coppery tang of blood filled the air between the two Sith lords. Their heightened senses picking the smell up easily over everything else. Both stilled for a moment, both feeling the shift in the Force around them. The first blood had been spilt. It was not a lot. A far cry from the bloodbath that was usually left in their wake, but it was a start. A start that quickly sent Vader into bloodlust.

Like a shark in a feeding frenzy, all logic, all control slipped away from Vader. The once god-like figure that had tormented him for so many years could bleed. And now that he saw it, now that he was finally able to comprehend that his master was not as all-powerful as he had portrayed himself to be, Vader found that he wanted to paint Coruscant with Sidious's blood. And he would.

A dark cry of fury and hunger tore out of Vader's throat, and before he knew what was happening, he was on his master again, holding nothing back. There would be no more games. There would be no more doubt. No more weakness. Only death.

And as the two Siths burst out of the throne room, their fight taking them out onto the palace balcony, Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith, had finally returned. And he would not be leaving again.

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As chaos erupted throughout the Senate, Padmé ducking down low, she wondered how everything had so suddenly turned on its head. One minute she was struggling to convince

Storm Troopers to join her and succeeding, the next, there were suddenly battle droids flooding in and shooting at everyone and everything. If there had been lingering doubts of General Grievous being alive, there were certainly none now. Everyone had believed that all the droids, along with their Supreme Commander, had been destroyed. Apparently that was not true. And Palpatine had kept them all around, just in case, the senator thought bitterly.

Looking around at her comrades, Padmé saw Bail and Dormé clutching their blasters tight, each taking turns to sit up and fire at the droids before ducking back down again. The trooper that had been in their pod was dead now, his body hanging over the side. While gruesome, Piett was using the body as a shield of sorts, it being able to give him cover as he picked off droid after droid. The nervous young man she had known was not present now. In fact, he was probably gone forever.

Jar Jar and Donis were huddled down, cowering, though Donis more than the Gungan. Her friend had no weapon, but Padmé knew that if he had, Jar Jar would attempt to help any way he could, even if he was scared. The temporary Naboo senator, Padmé had no idea about, but she was willing to bet he would be behaving like this no matter what. Knowing he was useless, she turned her attention to the Gungan.

“Jar Jar!” she called over the screams and blaster fire. When the Gungan’s orange eyes were on her, she jerked her head towards the dead trooper. “Get his blaster!”

Absolute panic fell over the usually goofy creature’s features, before they hardened with resolve. As carefully as he could manage, he quickly sat up and pulled at the blaster. The sudden jerking caused the body to fling upwards momentarily. At that same moment, Bail had sat up to fire down below, unaware that his head had been targeted. But thanks to the Gungan’s dumb-luck, the blaster bolt intended for the Alderaanian struck the dead trooper’s armor, reflecting slightly upwards, which, as chance would have it, hit the Coruscant pod’s undercarriage, which had been floating over to them, intent on killing the inhabitance from above.

The sudden cried from above caught everyone’s attention, and they watched as Cotrilla tried to steer the pod down gently. Between the confused firing and the damage done to the pod, it was a largely unsuccessful endeavor. The Coruscant pod ended up crashing almost head on with the middle rise of the chamber, where the Emperor usually sat if he came to a hearing, and kept going towards the opposite side. The senators seated there had long ago either been killed or had gotten away as the droids had entrenched themselves there. The pod took out not only the other pods resting there, but a large amount of droids, either destroying them or blocking them off from the chamber.

Padmé couldn’t help the shaky breath that escaped her. That had been a lucky break for them, but the danger was far from over and she could not afford to be distracted. While the Coruscant pod was no longer a problem in and of itself, its crashing had managed to create a good spark. Within moments, fire began spreading throughout the senator chamber.

“We have to get out of here!” the young senator cried, panicked. They were still hovering out in the open with droids closing in on every opening. They would either die or wouldn’t be able to avoid capture.

Piett sat up then, screaming at the top of his lungs, “FIRE! Fall back! Troopers! Protect and defend!”

Just as the young man was ducking down, a bolt hit him in the arm. Crying out, Firmus fell the rest of the way down, surprise causing his legs to give out. Dormé was beside him in an instant, looking over the wound.

"It's not bad," the commander was saying. "It's not bad. We need to get out of here."

"I'm on it," Bail nodded from the other side. "Padmé, Jar Jar, cover me."

The two Naboo inhabitants nodded gravely, each watching Bail's back from all sides while the Alderaanian tried to steer their pod to an exit that wasn't swarming with droids. Several Storm Troopers saw what they were doing, and instantly ran to protect an opening. A shot from below took out the pod's guidance system, and the craft became unstable and wobbly. Bail cursed, but did not leave the controls. "It's going to be rough!" he warned.

The others braced themselves, even as Padmé called out to the troopers. "Watch out!"

More successfully than the Coruscant pod, Bail was able to crash-land their craft without taking out too many others, as they went through the wall. While shaken and head spinning slightly, they were not too worse off and Padmé shot up and raced for the opening. The troopers had managed to pick off all the droids on this level, before they had fallen from the impact of the crash, but more droids were coming. So while the troopers were still picking themselves up, the senator covered them.

"Come on!" she called to her companions as well as the clones. "We need to get out of here!"

Snapping back into combat mode, the troopers stood with her while the others exited the craft. Piett and Dormé were the first ones out, the handmaiden blasting anything in her way, while the officer held his weapon in one hand, catching anything that the woman missed. Bail and Jar Jar came next, both dragging a sniveling Donis between them.

"We're with you, Senator," one trooper said beside her, his brothers nodding. "What are your orders?"

"We need to get out of here. Get everyone out and seal off the building," she commanded easily. "I have a feeling that the security system has been deactivated, so the fire might not be able to be contained."

"Roger that," the clone replied. "Moff Titus had a transport just two stories up from here. We can use it to get out."

"Which way?"

And with that, the group raced on. The troopers covered their escape, though everyone watched each others' backs. Everything was an utter mess. No one seemed to know what was happening, and the droids firing mindlessly at anything that moved did not help. Thankfully, the troopers that had come tonight were fast adapting, and were able to keep the casualty rate lower than it might have been otherwise as they worked to get the senators out while keeping the droids contained in the burning building.

It was a struggle to get to the transport, but when they did, Padmé couldn't help the sigh of relief that left her. They were just starting to fly away, everyone now safe, even the troopers that they had adopted along the way, a peace beginning to settle at the thought that they had

survived, when a terrible feeling overcame her. The senator suddenly became terribly nauseous, throwing up everything that had been in her stomach.

The others looked at her in alarm, each rushing to her in worry, but Padmé could not hear them. She couldn't hear anything except the beating of her own heart too loudly in her ears. A shift. A great shift in the Force had occurred, and it certainly wasn't for the better. The blocked link in her mind was on fire, and suddenly she felt nothing. It was gone. Only excruciating pain was left in its place for a split second before there was only blackness.

When she had calmed somewhat, and the agony lessened, she stared up at everyone around her, at all the concerned faces. Tears were streaming from her eyes unknowingly. Looking out over the city, she could see tiny bolts of light being fired back and forth at the Imperial Military Base as well as around the Imperial Palace. There were more battles going on there. In the distance, the Jedi Temple was still blazing, black smoke still blotting out the stars, while above even the clouds, the battle between Rebels and Imperials was taking place.

Chaos. It was utter chaos. Never before had Padmé seen such total and utter disorder. There was so much death going on around her. So much pain.

And it was all because of one man.

"We need to get to the palace," she whispered in horror.

Everyone around her frowned, worried. "Padmé," Bail began. "It's under attack—"

"NOW!" the younger senator bellowed, glaring in fear and anger at the Storm Trooper piloting.

There was only a moment of hesitation before the clone nodded. "Yes, Ma'am," he answered as he began steering towards the palace.

Still trembling, Padmé watched as the Imperial Palace grew closer and closer. It didn't come fast enough. She was almost frantic. She needed to get there. She needed to be with him! Or else she was certain she'd lose Anakin forever.



## 56. Chaos

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Kriffing Sith hells!

Firing his blaster, trying to get out of the way of other shots, Arlo wondered when everything had fallen apart. One minute he and his men were guarding the Base, the next it was utter chaos. The attack had been sudden, swift, and he had lost a lot of good people needlessly within the first several minutes.

It had all started out as he had predicted. Troopers had been sent to come to the Base to investigate the strange reports of apparent rebellion. Arlo had explained what had happened, explained Lord Vader's coming to the disbelieving officers as he was instructed. Of course they would not believe what he said. Of course they would order their Storm Trooper squadron to fire at them. The clones had hesitated as they were supposed to, and the other Troopers had spoke up to the validity of what they had heard. Of course proof was demanded before the other Troopers made any firm commitments.

That's when the attack happened. In that moment of intense indecision on part of the clones, their choice had been made for them. From out of the Base, right behind them, battle droids had suddenly appeared. It was such a surprise no one knew quite knew what to do for a split second. Training kicked in for the clones, however, and in no time, the white armored men were firing and setting up defensive positions anywhere they could.

And now, almost an hour into the fight, it was unclear who was really winning in this abrupt battle. Someone had tried to comm. him at one point, but the situation required such concentration and his full attention that Arlo hadn't been able to properly respond. Now was not the time to check up on the others. He didn't even have time to warn them of the reactivation of the battle droids. All he could do now was hold up his end of the plan and fight to protect the Base at all costs.

He just hoped that everyone else was faring better than he was.

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The sinister laugh echoed around the halls as Obi-Wan stood staring at the cyborg that was supposed to be dead. He couldn't quite believe that General Grievous had survived the Clone Wars. It didn't make sense. The Jedi could have sworn he'd heard about how Vader was sent to hunt for all Separatist Leaders, that, much like the Jedi, Sidious had ordered his apprentice to search and destroy all remnants of the past war. There would be nothing to stop the rise of the new Empire. There would be no looking back.

Apparently that information had been incorrect. It seemed the Sith had use of the cyborg after all. The main question that burned in the Knight's mind now, however, was if Anakin had known about Grievous being alive and here or not. It seemed unlikely that the younger man would not know of the former Droid Supreme Commander, yet Obi-Wan did not like to think of his new apprentice keeping the information from him. He had thought Anakin had told him of every possible trap. Apparently that information was also incorrect.

Pushing aside his shock and the beginning sensations of betrayal, the Jedi kept his 'saber poised, preparing himself for the fight. While wary and a bit afraid of what was going to happen, Obi-Wan, surprisingly found himself feeling rather confident. At least, he felt more confident in fighting the cyborg now that he might have a year ago. After all, he had faced Darth Vader twice, and then practiced with him over the past several days. Every other opponent he could face, save the Emperor himself, seemed dreadfully less ominous compared to the terror in black.

"General Kenobi," Grievous's voice boomed off the stone walls, almost deafening. "I am so glad to have the pleasure of your company this evening."

The Jedi felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on edge at the, indeed, sadistic sounding pleasure he heard. "Glad I could make it," he replied lightly, eyes scanning the creature, trying to determine how best to take him out.

Again, the cyborg laughed, before twirling his four lightsabers about. They cut into the walls, sparks flying from the contact, but as Obi-Wan instinctively took a step back so he would not get burned, Grievous stayed in place, intense yellowed eyes glaring at the Jedi in the dark. And when those sick golden eyes narrowed, all the pleasantries ceased. The battle had begun.

With a guttural cry of rage, Grievous launched himself at the Jedi Knight, all four lightsabers coming at their target from different angles. One came down while another cut up. The other two 'sabers came at him from the sides. The only thing the Jedi could think to do at the sudden, rather startling attack, was to jump backwards, aided by the Force. The attack, while expected, was not what the Knight had been thinking it would be. The sudden ferocity was rather impressive considering they had been exchanging in rather cheery banter just before.

But that was not his concern for the time being. Instead, once recovering from his momentary surprise, Obi-Wan grounded himself, and began controlling his mind. Locking eyes with the creature before him for a moment, the Jedi then decided that an unpredictable attack would be wise.

Much like the cyborg had done to him, Obi-Wan launched himself at his enemy. But while he slashed and parried away lightsabers that came at him, the Jedi's goal was not to instantly mutilate or destroy his target. While at least attempting to do some damage, his main goal was to preserve himself. While Grievous apparently believed his foe to be more cautious, was taken off guard—as hoped for—so his own response to the attack was a bit sloppy, and his returning blows did not even touch the Jedi.

The plan was therefore, a success, and Obi-Wan had gotten past Grievous in the cramped space. So now that he was past the cyborg it was time to implement the next part of his plan:

Run!

With as much speed as he could muster, Obi-Wan ran down the black corridor as fast as he could, hoping he could navigate the maze. This was no place for a battle. It was too cramped, too risky. He didn't stand a chance with only one saber here, and that was probably what Grievous had been counting on. It had been the perfect trap. But it wasn't fair, and Obi-Wan, despite knowing how the real world really worked, was a stickler on making things fair. It

was, in a sense, part of the Jedi Code after all, he thought with a grim smile. He just hoped that he could find somewhere more open to continue this fight. Make the fighting ground a little more even between them.

For a minute or so, he thought he was scot free, running as quickly as he could with the help of the Force. His startling tactic, however, didn't seem to have fazed Grievous too long, before soon after the Knight heard the telltale signs of the mechanical limbs working in overdrive, swiftly catching up. In the next moment, lightsabers came plunging down at him from above.

Obi-Wan ducked and rolled forward, away from the blades, but it took all of his self control and concentration to keep his momentum forward and to keep ahead of the cyborg while not getting injured. Grievous didn't make that very easy, though. The former general began attacking at him wildly, growling and hissing like some sort of beast. When attacking face to face, the Jedi couldn't help but be repulsed by the thing in front of him. From what he'd been told during the Clone Wars, General Grievous was supposed to be clever, smart and cunning. The more he fought with this creature, the more Obi-Wan began to realize that this wasn't the same creature that had once been general. Oh no, something had happened to this being, something terrible. Even when stripped of a proper body, the former Kaleesh had retained his mind, his humanity, so to speak.

Now, however, as Obi-Wan was forced to duck and block uncontained attacks, listening to the feral noises emitted from what passed as his chest. It was quite obvious that there was nothing left of the Kaleesh. In fact, there was no being at all. This was nothing more than a compilation of circuits and pieces of an animal that could not be tamed, too twisted and tortured to be saved. And even though it probably didn't make much sense to others beings, Jedi were loathed to take a life, even one as perverse as this.

How sad it must be to be this creature. The longer he fought with Grievous, the more brutish the cyborg became. The farce of civility before had been stripped away completely. By the manic gleam in the former general's eyes, and the wildness of his attack, Obi-Wan knew that there was very little in that mind anymore. There was no sanity, and the Jedi's pity for what had once been a true, living being, swelled.

At last, just as they were at the end of the tunnel, light pouring in from behind the Jedi, Obi-Wan was able to get a hit on the cyborg. Probably due to being forced to stare into light, the Jedi was able to cut off one mechanical hand. Grievous snarled rabidly, throwing his whole weight into trying to slash Obi-Wan to pieces, but the Knight was too quick for him. Summoning the Force, he called the fallen lightsaber to his hand, evening the odds just that much more.

And now that they were out of the confines of the tunnels, the Jedi found he felt freer and significantly less claustrophobic. As the cyborg recovered from his mad swinging, Obi-Wan knew he should press the attack, knew he should take advantage of the situation, but he didn't. Instead, he rolled his shoulders and took a moment to analyze his opponent. There was certainly a lot of rage behind that armor, rage and pain. Grievous was suffering. There was nothing left to ease that suffering, either, but bloodlust.

"You don't have to do this," Obi-Wan found himself saying, even as he readied both blades in his hands. "Stop now and I'm sure we can get help for you."

Instead of laughing or snarling, the cyborg made some sort of noise in the back of what passed as a throat. It sounded somehow grinding and gravely at the same time, a horrible, spine chilling noise that was not wholly natural. And without hesitation, Grievous flung himself at the Jedi. The three remaining lightsabers in his hand came dangerously close to severing Obi-wan's right arm and slash his leg. But thankfully, due to his training with Anakin and the former Sith's rather sneaky style when he wasn't trying to beat you to death with brute force, the Knight managed to just catch the sudden action from the cyborg. And, with a tremendous leap in the air, Obi-Wan jumped over Grievous and landed behind him, catching the creature in the back.

The cyborg gave a snarling cry and elbowed Obi-Wan hard in the chest. The more physical attack was unexpected by the Knight, and he stumbled backwards with an "Oof!" But Jedi training was so engrained into him that he recovered quickly, in time to block the next assault that came at him. There was little time to think about how he was going to have a pretty fantastic bruise on his sternum, nor was there time to worry if it had been broken.

And just like that, the two were a blur of motions and a deadly, dazzling display of green and blue. Only vaguely was Obi-Wan aware that they had made it into the Palace proper. They were coming up from the lower levels, and it seemed somehow strange that they were actually inside. Already Obi-Wan was nearly choking on the sensations of the Dark Side of the Force. It hung heavily in the air and seemed to be only getting stronger. In fact, it occurred to the Knight that something wasn't right... he couldn't feel Anakin anymore.

Startled by that realization, Grievous was able to catch the Jedi off guard again, cutting his upper arm. With a cry of pain, Obi-wan nearly lost grip of his own lightsaber, but jumped back out of the barrage of attacks coming from the cyborg, and managed to calm himself before continuing the fight. There was no time for pain, no time for worrying about his apprentice. Right now Obi-Wan needed to focus on dispatching Grievous before he could do anything else.

With that in mind, he launched himself back into battle, and hoped to Force that he would be able to come out of this alive and help the others.

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Worrying was not something Master Yoda made a habit of doing very often. In fact, worrying was a direct link to fear, and fear often made one do things that were not only unwise, but potentially unsafe. And for a Jedi in the midst of an area that reeked of the Dark Side, fear and worry was not something the Jedi Master could afford. Yet he found he couldn't help but be concerned for his companion.

Ever since launching themselves into attacking the battle droids at the palace, Trooper CT-585 had begun acting... differently. The old being had known that, despite what he'd thought clones were capable of, he'd known that CT-585 was worried about their companions and his friends. In fact, ever since ordering their allied Troopers to fire on their own, his surprisingly companionable personality had vanished. Instead of the oddly quirky and insightful creature that Yoda had been getting glimpses of, there was now only a mindless killer beside him.

CT-585's movements were precise and deadly as he took aim and hit droid after droid. He'd even stopped talking all together, instead relying on the Trooper hand signals. It was

lucky that the Jedi Master knew them well enough and was able to understand. It was as though all personality, all self, had been severed within the clone and he was acting strictly by program. The Jedi Master had to wonder, when the fight was over, and if they survived, would the man that he'd seen shining through return, or was he lost now forever?

When the next wave of battle droids had been destroyed, the two continued their jog towards the throne room, suspecting that that was where their two companions would have confronted the Emperor. And if not, then it was a safe bet they'd be around that area. The upper levels, at least, housed some of the Moffs and other important Imperial types at the very least, and even if they couldn't find the Emperor and Vader, they could at least take care of any of the dignitaries that hadn't gone to the Senate as planned.

They were about to turn a corner, when the Force screamed at the old master. Turning his head instantly, green eyes alert, the little being held up his hand for his companion to wait. Faithfully, the Trooper did as commanded, blaster still raised, ready to fire in an instant. He was a true warrior, and Yoda found he was glad to have such a man, clone or not, on his side, watching his back.

So, knowing that he could pause, the Jedi Master trailed the Force warning, trying to locate its origins. There was...something coming towards them. For a moment, he worried that it would be yet another wave of droidekas. The last had been surprisingly hard to get rid of. They were trying to save and ration their thermal detonators after all. And besides that, there were now less and less places where they could take cover if they used one anyone, and Yoda had no desire to get blown apart.

But it didn't seem like droids, whatever it was. Not exactly. In the thickness of the Dark Side, it was hard to make out anything clearly. So, weighing the options as best as he could, Yoda waved his hands forward. "Hurry," he urged his companion. "No time to lose."

If they could just get a little further up, maybe there would be a better place where they could confront the upcoming foes. Whatever it was coming towards them, the Jedi knew that it was not going to be easy. Yet, stretching out his senses forward, chocking on the swirling, blinding Darkness ahead of him, Yoda knew that what lie ahead would be worse. Much worse. That had to be the Emperor. But where was Vader?

Shaking his head, trying not to worry himself more, the old master and the clone continued their rush forward. Battle droids suddenly came at them from down two hallways. With only the slightly glance, the clone and green Jedi each turned towards one of the halls. Angling themselves so that their backs were protected as CT-585 knelt down, the two began deflecting and attacking a hallway each.

There was really no time for this, or Yoda didn't think there was. Something bigger than these clumsy pieces of metal was coming, and he had wanted to get away and find a better place to entrench themselves to prepare for the next attack. But it seemed that luck was just not on their side. They would have to fight here in this opening, and soon be surrounded. The two droid divisions blocking their front while whatever was coming came in from behind.

Panic threatened to overtake the Jedi Master, but he refused to let it. If he panicked, the battle would have been lost already. He had to continue to fight for there to be any hope of success in this mission.

As he deflected several shots, Yoda heard a cry of pain from behind him. Glancing behind him, he saw smoke coming from off of the Trooper's shoulder armor, but the clone was still firing, despite breathing harder now. "All right?" he called to his companion.

"Never better," CT-585 grunted, but the Jedi could hear the pain in his voice. This was not good.

It was becoming clear that they might not make it through this at all. No one cared much for Storm Troopers, and CT-585 would be disposed of quickly. Yoda flattered himself into believing for a moment that perhaps he'd been ordered to be kept alive. After all, he knew Sidious would have loved to have tortured him, but then, the Emperor was probably a little more focused on the betrayal of his apprentice to think much about the former Jedi Grand Master. In all likelihood, these droids had been ordered to destroy anyone that had come in. There would be no special treatment for the Jedi Master.

So it would be that he died next to a Storm Trooper, one of the very beings that had tried to kill him on Kashyyyk years ago and had helped destroy the Jedi Order. One of those soulless abominations created exclusively to kill and destroy. Yet Yoda found that he did not believe in his old prejudices anymore. In fact, he found that he was rather honored to have had a chance to have gotten to know and learn from one of these misunderstood creatures. It would be an honor to die beside one of these loyal men.

As if thinking along the same lines, Yoda saw the Trooper pull two of the thermal detonators from his belt. There was no way that they could find a secure place to hide themselves, and more droids were spilling in all the time. There was so little chance of escape now, that it was clear desperate measures were needed. Understanding hit the Jedi Master instantly, and he nodded to the clone, doing his best to block the firing coming from the clone's side as well as his own now while CT-585 set his rifle down.

"'Been an honor, Sir," the Trooper said, placing his thumbs on the buttons of the detonators.

"Honor, mine is," the green master muttered back, only vaguely aware of the Trooper's actions. At least, Yoda thought, that if they were going to go down, they would be going down in a blaze of glory.

CT-585 only had to wait another few seconds for whatever was coming in behind them to catch up. And just when the Trooper was prepared to push the buttons, something went flying through the air above their heads, crashing into the wall between the cross roads of the hall. It hit with tremendous force and made a sickening growl before it went completely still.

Both sides were startled for a moment, enough that the droids actually stopped firing momentarily. Yoda stared at the crumpled pile of limbs that had been sailing in the air moments ago in amazement. Grievous!

Turning around, the old Jedi saw Obi-Wan stand there, sweating, panting, with two 'sabers in his hands. His blue-green eyes were wide as he took in the scene before him. It must have looked quite dramatic, Yoda supposed, to see his master looking not much better than his former student with a clone poised to press the controls of two thermal detonators, nearly surrounded by droids. But after taking all this in, in a matter of a few seconds, Obi-Wan flung

himself at the confused droids at one end of the hall. Without hesitation, he began slicing through the group.

CT-585 snapped into action next, quickly hooking a detonator back to his belt before grabbing his blaster. Again, back in action, the clone nodded his head towards Obi-Wan, and Yoda understood. Much as the younger Jedi had done, the Grand Master launched himself into the middle of the sea of droids, helping the Knight cut them all down. The clone, on the other hand, barreled head first into the fray at top speed, a war cry tearing from his lips, even as he turned and threw the detonator back down the other hall before those droids could try and close them off.

The explosion was nearly instantaneous, and before anyone could have prepared themselves, the entire building seemed to shake from the effects of the explosion. Both droids and sentients were knocked off their feet from the shockwave, debris flying everywhere, dust from the crumbling walls and smoke filled the area. For a moment, everything was still. But Yoda knew it wouldn't last if they didn't act now.

Getting up as quickly as he could, trying not to let his spinning head or the ringing in his ears get the better of him, Yoda stood and saw Obi-Wan doing the same. Together, the two Jedi quickly, if a bit clumsily, dispatched the droids that were still functioning after the blast. It was only then when the panic of making sure their enemy was taken care of, that Yoda realized he did not see the Storm Trooper. "CT-585?" he called out.

There was a moment of dreadful silence, causing the Grand Master's stomach to turn in fear and sorrow. But then, as if knowing that his companions needed a sign, there was a low groan. Yoda rushed back towards the other end of the hall, to where he had last seen his companion and quickly pulled the tangled remains of droids off of the blackened white armor. Beside him, Obi-Wan, too, was quickly helping with the rescue efforts.

When they could see the clone clear enough, Yoda was horrified to see that the entire back of the Trooper's armor was black from the blast. There was a rather large hole in the back plating of his armor and one of the leg guards had been blown completely off. It was obviously bleeding. Badly. And while it was a little harder to tell with the injury on his back, it being blackened more severely than the rest of him, the Jedi was willing to bet that it was worse than the leg.

Exchanging grim looks with Obi-Wan, Yoda cautiously, carefully tried to roll the clone over. The younger Jedi held the Trooper's head as they rolled him over. Gently, the Knight pulled off the dusty helmet. The face that greeted them was pale, scrunched up in obvious pain.

"CT?" Obi-Wan spoke gently. "Cory?"

The Trooper peeled open one eye, before his lips quirked upwards around still clenched teeth. "One hellova party, huh?" he breathed out a weak laugh.

The two Jedi smiled in relief. "Help you, we will," Yoda said firmly. "All right you will be."

"Course I will," he growled. "Whose gunna... eat lunch with... Empress Amidala?"

Two pairs of eyes warmed considerably as they stared down at the wounded man. Smiling affectionately, Obi-Wan nodded. "Right. You're absolutely right. Now, come on, we've got to—"

The Force was suddenly screaming at them again, causing the two Jedi to spin around. There, coming out of the smoke, looming over them ominously, was the unmistakable shape of General Grievous. With everything else happening, somehow they'd forgotten all about him. Or rather, they had dangerously assumed he'd been killed in the blast along with most of the droids. A truly treacherous mistake.

But before Obi-Wan or Yoda could do more than rise to their feet, a blast rang out in the air, catching the cyborg in the chest. The ribcage of the former general had been forced open, whether from one of Obi-Wan's former attacks or the blast of the detonator, the Grand Master didn't know, but it left the precious vital organs terribly exposed. Exposed enough that a simple shot from a blaster could kill.

The cyborg, stumbled backwards, hands roaming over the critical wound he'd just received, eyes wide and enraged as he growled in agony. Another blast was shot, hitting in the exact same place, setting the organs and the fluid running through them on fire. And with one last scream, the Supreme Commander of the Droid Army of the Separatist fell backwards. He did not rise again.

Stunned, the two Force-users turned to stare down, only to see the Trooper with his blaster slightly raised in one hand, a dour expression on his face. Obi-Wan let out a tense laugh, but it was suppressed quickly when the blaster immediately dropped as CT-585's eyes rolled back in his head. His body went completely limp.

"No!"

Yoda wasn't sure if the cry had come from him or Obi-Wan or both, but in the next instant, they were back kneeling beside the fallen clone. "We've got to get him out of here," the younger Jedi said, voice clearly panicked.

"Several room, back down the hall," Yoda motioned with his head. "Take him there, we can. Medical supplies he has."

"Right," Obi-Wan nodded, before scooping up the frighteningly pale Storm Trooper.

Grabbing the helmet, not wanting to leave evidence of just who might be in here, Yoda followed after them. Swiftly, he guided the Knight to one of the room he'd seen earlier. It was a meeting room of some sort, but it had large, comfortable looking couches in it, which was perfect for their wounded companion. Once the door was closed, locked behind them, the two Jedi did not waste a moment and began peeling off the charred armor and began looking at the wounds.

The shoulder wound from where CT had gotten shot was easiest to bind up. It was a superficial burn, the armor had taken the brunt force of it, but there would certainly be a bruise around that open lesion. What worried the Grand Master was the back and leg injuries. While Obi-Wan set to work wrapping and binding the leg, Yoda tried his best to focus his energy to partially heal the wound on the back.



He was no healer, but in that moment, Yoda wasn't sure he'd ever wished he was more in his long life. It was bad. Very bad, but he tried not to think about that and sent soothing coolness to the unconscious Trooper's mind. Hopefully he wasn't feeling much of this.

"I'm not sure we have enough bacta to cover all of that," Obi-Wan's shaky voice broke the fevered silence.

"Any more, have you?" he asked, even as he began looking through the Trooper's belt, hoping another pocket contained more medical supplies. It didn't. He'd only brought standard issue. How droll.

"Wait," the Knight muttered as he began looking through the belt of his officer's uniform. "Yes!" he cried in delight, holding up patches. They still did not have enough to cover the entire wound, but they now could cover the worst of it once they were done cleaning it.

"Here," Yoda handed the others to the younger being, before setting to work dressing and trying to use to force to heal the Trooper.

After a while once CT-585 was taken care of the best that they could do, the two Jedi sat quietly together, sweat gleaming off of their dirty faces, their clothes burnt and filthy. They took a moment to simply sit and breathe while they could, because both knew that this stillness wouldn't last long.

"A comm, you have?" Yoda asked softly after a moment.

"Here," the Knight handed it to his master without thought.

The green Jedi nodded, before turning to regard his old student. "Stay here, I must, with CT-585. Need you, I fear, your apprentice does."

Obi-Wan sat back, sucking in a hissing breath. Blue-green eyes became unfocused, and Yoda knew that the younger man was trying to reach out to Vader. From the amount of effort it looked like the other was expending to accomplish task, the Grand Master knew something was wrong. He'd known Obi-Wan and Vader hadn't properly gotten to form a master-padawan bond, but this... Something was not right.

"Go to him, you must," Yoda urged.

"But I... I can't just leave you two," the Knight sighed. "You'll need help, especially with him wounded."

"Call for help, I will," the Grand Master held up the comm. that Obi-Wan had given him moments before. "Reinforcements will come. Go. To Vader you must go."

With one last sigh, Obi-Wan stood, nodding. "When this is all done..." He paused. "I'll... I'll come back to check on you," he finished lamely.

"Go," the ancient Jedi pleaded. This was not the time for lengthy goodbyes or last words.

So, with a sharp nod, the Jedi Knight turned and ran out the door, making sure it was closed behind him. When he was out of sight, Yoda turned to the comm. in hand and quickly plugged in a number. "Master Yoda to AR-1104. Emergency. Medical teams needed immediately. Repeat: Medical teams needed immediately."

There was a sickening silence on the other end, and Yoda briefly wondered if his message hadn't been received. Perhaps they were fighting as well? Maybe they couldn't take the time to answer?

But then, the comm. crackled to life. "AR-1004 here. Roger that. Where are you, Master Yoda?"

It was only then that the Grand Master realized he had no idea where he even was. The palace was a huge place, and they could have winded themselves anywhere in here by now. He wasn't even sure what story they were on now either.

"Follow the trail of droids, you will," he replied drily. "Wait for you, I will."

And with that settled, the old master turned to stare into the dreadfully white face of CT-585, of his friend, before going to the door to stand watch. All he could do now was wait. It seemed he'd have to let Obi-Wan help Vader alone. But as he felt another surge of black energy, Yoda just hoped it wasn't too late.

## 57. Part 1: The Fall

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In all of the many visions Sidious had ever had in his life about his ultimate betrayal, the manner in which his betrayal was actually occurring had never been shown like this. It surprised the Sith actually, when rarely anything ever did. He had known his apprentice would not remain satisfied with being second in command for very long, yet in all of the many ways he'd seen Vader's treachery play out, right now was not happening according to any of his visions. The younger Sith wasn't playing by the rules that the Dark Lord had set up, and while it beyond frustrating, a part of the Emperor was pleased to know his apprentice could actually surprise him. The boy had made an exceptionally powerful Sith. That was something to be proud of, he supposed, but he was still furious. Especially since now that he did not know what would happen there stood a very great chance that he would come out dead.

As he struggled against the overwhelming power of his apprentice, the Emperor found a moment to reflect upon how far the boy had come. When he had first taken Vader on as an apprentice, he had been nothing more than a sniveling, pathetic brat that constantly whined for his mother. Now, however, there was no trace of that child. That part of the man was so thoroughly eradicated that no one would ever believe that the boy that Vader had been born could have ever existed. There was nothing left of that creature. All that remained, all that had ever been left for many, many years, was Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith.

Spinning away from a particularly vicious slice upwards from the taller man was much more difficult for Sidious to dodge than it would have been if the attack had come from anyone else. But as it was, Vader was not only immensely powerful, he also had the impressive ability to be very quick and surprisingly light on his feet. He was the perfect killing machine, becoming a god-like figure in only a few short years in all his dark glory. There was no one in the galaxy that did not know the name of Vader and did not fear it. And it was all because of Sidious.

The two Sith spun and swiped at each other again and again, Vader once more catching Sidious, nicking his leg this time. As before, the sight and smell of blood sent the younger man into a frenzy, and he came at his former master faster than before. With a dark scowl, the Master Sith found an unfamiliar sensation beginning to creep up in the back of his mind. He tried to push it back, tried to focus on Vader's mind, still attempting to break his shielding. While the boy was certainly drowning in the Dark Side, there was still much confusion in his former apprentice. There were things going on that Sidious seemed to know nothing about, and while it infuriated him that this could be so, he also knew it was key to breaking the younger man. To defeat him.

And so, making a strategic retreat, he decided that mind games would be best. Vader was an emotional, passionate creature, it would be simple to twist his mind, as he always had.

"You disappoint me, Lord Vader," he sneered, even as the younger man let out a strangled snarl. "I had no idea that you were so weak as to fall for the tricks of the Jedi."

Vader didn't bother to answer. Instead, he sent a powerful Force push towards his former master. Sidious was able to dodge it, even as he sent one of the gargoyles from the palace spinning towards the younger Sith. The boy sliced it through with a relish, using the Force to keep the two pieces from hitting him.

"Was that how you eluded me?" the Emperor pressed, waiting patiently as the taller man stalked towards him in rage. "You submerged yourself in the Light, didn't you?" He jumped to the next balcony to avoid Vader's angry swings. "How pathetic! What, did you think you could be good?"

Again, a terrible roar tore from the younger man's throat as he jumped onto the other balcony with Sidious. It shook from the weight and force in which Vader had landed. This balcony was a lot smaller than the one outside the throne room, yet it would have to do. If Sidious could just maneuver his apprentice away from here, to one of the many traps that littered the palace, perhaps he could at least slow the titan down. That strange feeling in the back of his mind was beginning to burn, snaking to the foreground of his thought and into his heart, but again, the Emperor tried not to dwell on it. It was harder than it should have been, especially when the thought of how Vader would never stop hunting him should he somehow escape came to mind.

It was becoming more and more difficult, Sidious realized, to fight with his apprentice. Vader was a much younger man, much younger and stronger. The boy's decent to the Dark Side had been more of a plunge when he'd first entered, but the Master knew there had been instances which had slowed the boy's progress. At times, when Vader was calm, he would take steps back from the Darkness instead of continuing his journey forward. Only pain and rage kept Vader down his truth path, towards his destiny.

That was why Sidious tortured his apprentice, at times seeming to be for no reason other than because he felt like it. The black terror was nothing more than his slave, a tool that he could use to inflict fear. That was all the boy had known in his life. That's all he could be. There was nothing else the galaxy could offer the boy.

And with that thought, Sidious knew that even if he did not survive, even if he gave in to this strange sensation of fear, his legacy would live on in Vader. And nothing could ever separate the boy from his hate.

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The moment they came around the palace, it was easy to see that there was no getting in. At least not without a fight. Firmus was nervously piloting the ship, trying not to get shot down in all the confusion around the palace airspace. All around the palace darts of red light were flashing, a sea of white armor could be seen standing just outside while the unmistakable browns and grays of droids came swarming out of the palace proper. It was an utter mess.

"I don't think I can land," the young Lieutenant-Commander confessed, sweat running down his face.

"I need to get into the palace," Padmé said flatly, trying to ignore the others still fussing over her.

“But my lady—” Dormé began, but was cut off by Bail.

“What do you need there? You’ll be killed even before you set foot in there!” he insisted.

“Get me into the palace,” the young senator commanded, knowing that the Imperial officer would listen to her more than the others. He was well trained, after all, and Anakin had told him to obey her.

The young man looked back at the senator for a moment, eyes full of anxiety, before he nodded. “I’ll try ’round the other side,” he muttered. “Maybe I can get you in through a more secure area,” he mused out loud.

Padmé nodded absently, taking a deep breath. Her head didn’t necessarily hurt anymore, but there was a strange throbbing that wouldn’t go away. And her stomach churned with anxiety. She wasn’t sure what was really going on with Anakin, but she had a very bad feeling about it. Something was not right and she was going to find out what it was. She had to. If she didn’t help him, who would?

...But if she couldn’t help him, what then? While she tried not to, the ‘what ifs’ of the entire plan weighed heavily upon the senator’s mind as she was forced to sit and wait. What if Anakin was killed? What would happen to all of them if their plan didn’t succeed? It wasn’t as if things could go back to the way they were. Anakin had created too much chaos and disorder. The army was now divided, the navy struggling with its loyalties, and no one save a very few knew what was really going on.

Anakin had to survive, Padmé decided. He was the only one who retained the loyalty of the army and navy. He was the only one who knew the absolute inner workings of the Empire. If Sidious lived there would be a great Civil War across the Empire, and the Emperor wouldn’t be able to retain his control. The only hope any of them had was in Anakin. He was the key to all of this, the key to peace.

Unconsciously Padmé’s hand went to her stomach and she rubbed it slightly. It wasn’t just that she wanted Anakin to survive so he could help restore the galaxy; she also had some very personal, selfish reasons for wanting him to live. She wasn’t sure what he knew, what he’d been able to figure out, but she’d promised to explain everything to him. He needed to know about the twins.

After all the struggling and debating with herself on whether or not she should tell, it would be devastating if he were to die without knowing the truth. The full truth. About everything.

Force, the thought of him dying without accomplishing not only his task as the Chosen One of the Prophecy was nothing compared to how distraught she’d be if he didn’t know about their children. Or leaving him to wonder about how she truly felt about him. There were still so many misunderstandings and misconceptions between them Padmé wasn’t sure she could stand the guilt of never having the chance to clear anything up.

Of course there was always the possibility that Anakin would live through this, but also turn back to the Dark Side...

No, the senator scolded herself. Don’t think that. Anakin promised. He won’t turn back. He won’t. He’ll come back.

But even as she thought this, that feeling of dread that had leaked into her marrow chilled her. She could not deny that there could be a chance for Vader to rise again, but she so desperately wished she could ignore the possibility. The sudden absence of Anakin in her mind, the sickening weight of evil that seemed to have settled down on everything was not making it any easier for her to dismiss the prospect. Something was very wrong here, and Padmé knew that she was going to have to find out what it was and fix it. If she could.

The shuttle was finally able to land after Piett employed several interesting maneuvers. Clones and droids alike had shot at the craft, but apparently Firmus had been able to get a call through to the Troopers, who immediately stopped firing on them and turned back to the droids.

They had come to land around a relatively empty part of the palace, where there were at least no droids or clones swarming and firing at one another. From the looks of it, they had landed in the middle of the garden. Padmé had only been in this part once for a party a couple years ago, but she thought she remembered her way around well enough. Grabbing her blaster, she decided to test her memory.

As a group, everyone in the craft—save Donis, who remained huddled and cowering in the back and Jar Jar who stayed with him to watch out for the cowardly man—rushed out, immediately forming a protective circle, watching each other’s backs like an elite team of Troopers. After all they’d been through just that night, it was almost natural. They knew that they were surrounded by enemies, and they weren’t taking any chances.

A terrible sound from high above caught their attention, and when they looked up, they could just make out two figures jumping from balcony to balcony. The figures were dark and might have been missed completely in the confusing night had not the glow of two red ‘sabers given away their identity. The sight made Padmé’s blood freeze.

Without much thought, the young senator rushed forward, leaving behind her friends. She didn’t have a thought for them, for protection. Her mind was suddenly and completely filled with fear and worry for Anakin. He was so close, she was almost there. Hold on, Anakin, she tried to use the link with him, but knew he couldn’t hear her. The link didn’t exist.

The others yelled out for her, but she didn’t hear them. Her mind was occupied with only the desperate desire to be near her lover again. Only when she entered the palace did she come to herself enough to realize she had to watch for attack. There were probably still droids lurking in this part of the palace as well, especially since they had seen the shuttle land. She had to watch out and protect herself, not just for self preservation, but because she had two little ones along on the ride with her, as well as Anakin depending on her, too.

The other three humans just managed to catch up with her when droids came rolling in around the corner. “Fall back!” Padmé yelled in warning, ducking back around the corner. The others followed suit, and soon a small skirmish ensued.

There weren’t very many droids, the majority probably still at the front with the clones, but there were enough to make it inconvenient for the group to move quickly. Piett seemed to know where exactly to hit the droids, thankfully, and quickly instructed everyone on what to do. Apparently these droids were of an older model and were not as well protected, their shields weaker. Thankfully, after only about ten minutes, they had all been dispatched, but before the last one fell, Padmé took the opportunity to slip away while the others recovered.

She knew she should probably stick with her friends, that it would be for the best to have back up, but they slowed her down. They also wouldn't understand her urgency, and she had no time to explain it to them. Something besides just her fear was driving her forward, and she knew she had to get to Anakin. Nothing else was as important at the moment.

Running through the halls of the palace was similar to that of a maze. Everything seemed to twist and turn, easily confusing any who did not know their way around. It wasn't all that surprising. The Emperor was a manipulative bastard, he'd probably thought all about how best to confuse and control even the people who just wanted to walk around the palace. But if she were the most powerful person in the galaxy, Padmé supposed she'd take extra precautions to ensure that if there were an invasion, no one could get to her either.

Surprisingly, however, as she ran, she was met with no resistance. There were no droids or clones to be seen. The higher she went in the palace, the closer she got to the throne room, the more wary the senator became. Something wasn't right here. Where was everyone?

As she rounded another corner, at last she found signs of a fight. An entire hallway was blackened and droid pieces were strewn all about. The fight looked horrendous, as though a detonator had gone off, and one probably had if she was any judge. She didn't see anything organic, so Padmé assumed that whoever had been here must have gotten away, though she didn't see how. There weren't any good places to hide against the blast. But they must have escaped because she didn't see anyone.

A glint of cream caught the senator's attention in the sea of blackened brown. Walking into the carnage carefully, Padmé leaned down to see a strange looking droid only to reel backwards in disgusted terror. Because there, right before her, was General Grievous.

Taken by complete surprise, Padmé found herself stumbling backwards and even shot down at the creature out of reflex. The mechanical body jolted from the blaster fire, but otherwise didn't move. In all of her adrenaline fueled panic, it hadn't occurred to her that Grievous might truly be dead already. After learning that he had survived tonight, it seemed a little unreal that she was seeing what remained of him now.

"Padmé?"

Spinning around, blaster raised, the senator was prepared for a fight, but when she saw a familiar uniform, now charred, she lowered her weapon. "Obi-Wan," she breathed.

"What are you doing here?" the Jedi rushed forward, concern on his face. "What's happened?"

How could she put into words all that she felt? How could anyone really understand what she was feeling unless they had felt it themselves? But Obi-Wan was the closest person to Anakin besides her here, and he knew many of her secrets. So, after a few deep breaths, the senator decided to confess. "I... can't feel my link with him anymore. I think... I think something's very wrong with Anakin."

The Jedi's grim look didn't make her feel any better about what was happening. "I think we'd better get to him. Now," Obi-Wan said quietly, before gesturing forward.

It was a bit surprising he was willingly letting her go with him. So far her presence in the entire mission had been questioned and objected to by most of them. But maybe the Jedi

realized how much Anakin would need her. Maybe Obi-Wan realized how much she needed him. Whatever the case, Padmé was just glad she was able to go and wouldn't have to argue.

Together, the two rushed the rest of the way to the throne room. They were not stopped by droids, and once outside the door, they saw the bodies of the Emperor's guards littering the floor. The doors were left open and just inside they could see more guards on the floor. Dead. A chill ran through Padmé, knowing that Anakin had killed these men. But there was no time to dwell on that.

Instead, with only a shared glance with Obi-Wan, the two rushed into the throne room. There was no one in sight, though the heavy feeling of the Dark Side hung in the air. The sound of 'saber clashes could be heard not too far away, and only then did the senator remember seeing Anakin and the Emperor jumping balconies. "This way!" she called, rushing out.

The sight that greeted them was terrifying, yet awe inspiring. Never before had Padmé seen such a lightsaber battle. Not even when Anakin had trained with Obi-Wan had she seen her lover move so fast. The two Sith Lords were battling each other brutally, neither holding back. Two crimson 'sabers were mere blurs of light and sound as they faced off one another, each throwing impossibly heavy objects at one another as they fought as well. For just a moment the senator and Jedi were frozen in place watching the otherworldly sight.

But not for long. With a powerful leap, Obi-Wan entered the fray. It was too far for Padmé to jump, and there wasn't really anything she could do at the moment except stand there and watch. They were all moving too fast for her to train her blaster on for long, and she didn't want to risk accidentally hitting one of her friends by mistake. And so, she watched, watched and prayed that they would be safe, and angry she couldn't do more.

The Knight's sudden entrance into the fight shifted the balance that had been created between the Sith, however. Obi-Wan's appearance seemed to create confusion for the two original opponents. Anakin's furious movements halted momentarily as he turned to stand off against the Jedi on instinct. And that was a mistake.

In horror, Padmé watched helplessly as a bolt of lightning was shot at Anakin from the Emperor. "NO!" she screamed, but of course it didn't help.

The former Sith went down hard, electricity surging through his body, shorting out his respirator controls and bouncing off his mechanical arm. He did not scream as the tremendous amount of energy circulated throughout his body, but he did fall backwards heavily, enough to make a painful sound. His helmet had probably cracked from the force of the fall. And Padmé watch powerlessly as her lover's body convulsed on the ground as the Emperor continued to send lightning into his body.

The smile on the Emperor's face was hideous, sadistic, his yellow teeth bared in satisfied fury. But thankfully, Obi-Wan came back to his senses and began an assault on the Sith Lord. The senator, however, didn't really follow her friend's progress.

"Anakin!" she screamed, rushing to the railing. "Anakin, get up! Anakin!" She began looking for a way across to the other side on the ledge.

The black body laid motionless, every once in a while a surge of lightning would rip through his still form, his body twitching and jumping from the energy. Please, please be all



right, she chanted as she started to crawl across the ledge as best as she could, keeping her eyes trained on the body of her lover. He couldn't be dead. He had to be all right!

Just when she was nearly across, about to crawl over the railing, one massive black hand shot up from the still body, and across the way, the Emperor's hands froze in mid swing with his lightsaber—a blow that would have severed Obi-Wan's arm—coming to an immediate halt. The heavy feeling in the air suddenly came crashing down on them all, suffocating the remainder of the Light that had dwelled there.

The Jedi stumbled backwards looking faint, while the Emperor was still frozen in place, his eyes wide and for the first time, his expression marred with fear. On the ledge, Padmé clung tightly to the stone, trembling as she watched her lover rise unnaturally to his feet, as if hovering. It was then that she knew, she knew for certain now, that Lord Vader had returned.

Without a glance at Obi-Wan, perhaps not believing him to be a target, Vader threw out one hand that sent the Jedi crashing back against the stone as he strode over to the Emperor, the air alight with hatred. The night was filled with the sounds of battle below them, flashes from the fighting above in space, and in the distance, the night sky was lit with flames from the Jedi Temple. And there, silhouetted, was Darth Vader, his hand still raised as he held the Emperor in place, the air around them eerily still as the respirator no longer functioned.

The older Sith looked as though he were desperately trying to get out of the younger's Force hold, but it was no use. Vader was stronger, and all the Emperor could do was twitched his head to the side, trying to pull away. Never before had Padmé seen the old man so utterly vulnerable. It almost didn't seem feasible.

"This is not... possible!" Sidious spat, choking around the sudden hold on his throat as Vader began crushing the life out of him. Personally. The senator could hear the fear in his voice. "You can't... breathe without the... respirator!"

Vader's hand tightened around the old man's neck, physically squeezing the life out of him along with the Force. Everything was tense as the two Sith Lords faced each other for the last time. A muffled growl escaped the younger man, before he closed his hand tighter around the Emperor's throat again. And in a moment of absolute brutality, Vader began throwing the body about with the Force. Over and over again, he slammed the Emperor against the stone, on the railing, anywhere he could with such tremendous force, some of the stone cracked from the impact. The old man gasped only once before he was silent, though Padmé knew he was still alive. This was Vader's big moment, he wouldn't let the Emperor die so easily.

Over and over again Vader hit his master against the stone using both the Force as well as physically with his own hand. Palpatine wretched with each attack, but didn't seem able to get away from the younger man's Force hold. It was then that Obi-Wan seemed to come to after his own attack and he jumped in front of the feral creature in black.

"Anakin!" he cried out, his voice a mix between horror, disgust, and a plea. "Anakin, stop this! Stop this now!"

The mask of Vader turned sharply to the Jedi, and again, a growl came forth through the face mask. Without hesitation, the younger man again flung out his hand, sending the Knight souring through the air and over the balcony.

“No!” Padmé screamed, tears streaming down her face now. Finally coming over the rail, the senator was at last on the same balcony as the Sith. Immediately she ran to the rail to look down, and felt a small wave of relief that somehow, Obi-Wan had managed to grab a hold of a ledge several stories down. He looked a bit shaken and must have scrapped his head as there was blood running down his face, but he was none the worse for wear. At least he was alive. For now.

Now that she was reassured that the Jedi was all right, Padmé wasn’t sure what to do now, but she knew that she had to try something. Everything was swiftly spiraling out of control, and the only one that could stabilize events was Anakin. She had to get him back, had to find him under all that Darkness.

After a few more hits, Vader allowed the Emperor to slip down to the ground like a nexu growing bored of its toy. Palpatine’s body convulsed as his spine was most likely shattered, and it was clear that he evacuated his bowels, having lost control of all muscle functions. His sick yellow eyes were spinning around and around in a panicked daze. He was paralyzed and probably had severe brain trauma. But while Vader staked over to the fallen Sith Lord like a predator intent on finishing off its play thing, Padmé stood frozen, her mind whirling with what she could do.

Taking the chance to look over the ledge again, the senator saw that Obi-Wan had managed to climb up a little way and was just crawling into a window. Padmé worried what Vader would do while the Jedi was so vulnerable, but looking over her shoulder told the senator that Vader was more interested in Palpatine than either the Jedi or herself. The question now became what would he do once he was through with the Emperor?

Bending over, the large man grabbed the Emperor by the hair and hoisted him up into the air. The yellow eyes that Padmé had come to fear and loath were cloudy, the face that incased them bloodied and already bruising. Vader marched over to the railing then and dangled the useless body over. The black helmet cocked to the side, almost as though curious, before he changed grips to squeeze the Emperor’s throat. Somehow, there was still a bit of life in the old man, and a hand twitched at his sides, as if trying to get them to work so he could do anything dislodge Vader’s grip.

It was wholly useless, however. Vader was not letting go, not yet, and there was nothing that the older man could do. Vader continued to stare at the Emperor, as if studying him, imprinting the image of the near corpse in his mind, before the massive gloved hand suddenly clamped down around Palpatine’s throat viciously. The snap of the neck seemed to echo all around Coruscant, and without a second thought, Vader flung the body over the edge with disinterest, as if he had been nothing more than trash.

By the railing, Padmé leaned forward again, watching as the Emperor fell. And within a few seconds, he struck the ground with no one save herself as witness. It was then that the weight of what had just transpired came to the senator:

Emperor Palpatine, Sith Lord Darth Sidious, was no more.

Padmé watched in silence as Vader’s shoulders heaved as he took deep breaths, as if only now did he feel the exhaustion of his battle with the Emperor. Standing motionlessly the young woman tried to wrap her mind around what she had just seen, and about what this all

meant. A horrendous howl torn from Vader's lips, his head tilting back as he cried to the galaxy a war cry of victory. It was rare and savage, and it chilled the senator to her core.

A sob escaped her as she watched her lover fall down into the void of the Dark Side. Anakin was really gone. He was gone and left only Vader. She knew this when the black mask turned towards her, empty, pitiless lenses glaring where blue eyes should have been stared down at her. Gloved hands that killed without remorse now encased hands that she knew to be so tender and gentle. Anakin was gone, and Padmé wasn't sure he was ever coming back.

## 58. Part II: Skywalkers

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He had done it. After over a decade of torture, of hating, of planning, he had finally done it! Darth Sidious was no more! His master was no more!

A surge of pure elation coursed through Vader as his darkest, sweetest dream had finally come true. Sidious was dead and now he stood to inherit and rule everything. He had all the power, and the realization of this sent jolts of pure ecstasy through the Sith Lord. He was the master now. Him! No one could defeat him! No one could order him around! No one could disobey him! No one could hurt him ever again.

A cry tore from his lips as the full weight of what had just happened came settling down upon him. It wasn't just that he now had unlimited power in the galaxy. It wasn't even about killing the one who had tormented him nearly his entire life. This was so much more than that. Sidious wasn't there anymore, would never be again. For the first time in Vader's life, he was free.

His victory was marred when a sob caught his attention. Turning his head sharply, Vader saw Senator Amidala standing near the railing, one hand covering her mouth, the other wrapped around her middle. Her face was crumpled up into despair and she was crying. He did not like to see her like that, it annoyed him. Why was she like this? Why was she not delighted that he had killed the Emperor? Did she not realize that he had achieved ultimate victory? Where was her approval? Her joy? Her gratitude? She should be down on her knees thanking him.

A growl crawled out of him as he stood staring at her, watching as she just began crying harder. "Anakin," her voice was broken.

The sound of that name had the Sith Master hissing, recoiling as it burned his ears. That name was never to be mentioned again. How dare she utter it? Didn't she understand? Didn't she see? That man no longer existed. He had been too weak, and in the end, it had been Vader, Vader alone, who had been strong enough to defeat Sidious!

"Please, Anakin," she used that accursed name again. "Please, come back to me. Please..."

Stalking towards the little woman, Vader found his temper rising. "That name," he spat, "no longer has any meaning for me."

Did she truly not understand? How could she yearn for that man when he hadn't been able to defeat the Emperor? How could she want that man when he hadn't been able to protect her? Foolish, thoughtless woman.

"Don't do this," she pleaded, not flinching as he came closer to her. "You're a good person, Anakin!"

"Silence!" he snarled, furious. How dare she continue to say that name? How dare she assume to know him. She didn't know him. She didn't know anything. How could she? She who could not control the Force, who knew nothing of the power of the Dark Side.

Her lips trembled as she stared up at him, brown eyes flashing with pain and grief. “No,” she whispered, shaking her head. “Don’t do this. Come back to me. Come back.”

What she was saying just didn’t make sense to the Sith Lord. He was right here, right in front of her, and he had all the power in the galaxy. He had killed the Emperor, he had proven that he was superior. The galaxy was before him and he could do anything he wanted, he could make the galaxy anyway he wanted it. Hadn’t the senator always complained about the injustice in the world? Hadn’t she always defied Sidious? Now the bastard was gone and he had the power to do all that she had ever wanted. He could make the galaxy just as she wanted, if she but united with him.

“It is useless to resist me. Don’t let yourself be destroyed needlessly,” he said, giving her a chance. He would offer her this once, and once only. “Join me, and with our combine strength, we can end this destructive conflict and bring order to the galaxy.”

A part of him wasn’t even sure why he was offering this to her. She had no real power that could allure him anymore, he had all of it. Yet, a part of him could still remember her arms around him, feel her body pressed against his, her lips over his. Lust was not unknown to Sith, and he allowed himself to think of her in such respects. She was his to do with as he pleased, after all. Everyone was. He desired her, and if he could not obtain her, he would destroy her. Like anyone else who would get in his way.

The young woman took a step back from him, shaking her head, eyes still wide with terror. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing,” she whispered. “You’re gone. You’re really gone.”

“Join me,” Vader held out his hand, reaching out to her, willing her to take it, ‘and we can rule the galaxy together.’ The senator began shivering, crying harder, frustrating him. “Come with me. It is the only way.”

“I don’t know you anymore,” Padmé cried. “Anakin, you’re breaking my heart.”

“Don’t make me destroy you,” he growled, again, feeling a stab of pain as the name left the woman’s lips.

“Stop!” she cried. “Just stop! Come away with me. We can... we can run away together. Come back! Come back to me!”

She was not accepting his offer. Resignation came over the Sith before being swallowed rage. How dare she refuse him? He was Emperor now, and no one was to refuse him. It was not his fault that she was being stupid by not accepting her only chance to rule by his side. He had tried, and she was the one to blame for all of this. She was the one who was too blind to see what his powers could accomplish, too short sighted to understand that he was the only one who could restore order in the galaxy. He was the only one who could rule the Empire.

It was all so clear to him, his destiny so plainly laid out, why was she doing this to him? Why could the senator not see this as well? All around him, debris began floating and the cracks in stone began splintering further in his wrath. Senator Amidala was not supposed to refuse him. She was not supposed to be this foolish.

“Come back,” she repeated, tentatively stepping towards him once more, brave in the face of his anger. “Come back to me, Anakin.”

The Light was shining in her and it burned, ripping at his mind, seeping in the minor cracks of his iron will. He growled in pain and hate, not understanding why he suddenly felt so helpless.

“Please,” Padmé’s hand reached out and touched his gloved one. “I... I-I love you.”

The damn burst within the Sith, and before the young woman could have done a thing, his mechanical hand reached out, locking around her throat. “Enough,” he hissed. She had had her chance and she had refused him. All the hate and blackness in his heart swelled to the forefront of his mind, trying to block out the agony her words had suddenly caused him. He hadn’t wanted to hear that, he hadn’t meant for her words to touch him as much as they had.

But they did. They did and he found himself hating her. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be. Padmé wasn’t supposed to resist him, she wasn’t supposed to say such things. She wasn’t supposed to make him feel like... this, so suddenly torn and confused. He’d been so sure, felt so confident. But it had all started to crack and had now shattered because of her.

Darth Vader wouldn’t stand for this. The burning pain in his mind coursed through his veins, even as her final words rang agonizingly in his ears, echoing over and over again. He had to stop this, stop it before it was too late. Before everything he’d worked for, for so long slipped through his grasp. Before he realized that this was not what he truly wanted.

Silently Vader took in the wide, terrified brown eyes that stared up at him, bugged out as he squeezed tightly. Her hands flew to his hand, but she didn’t try to claw at him as the Emperor had, as anyone else might have. Instead, Padmé just looked at him, the eyes that had once held warmth for him now burning into him with fear, sadness, accusation, hate.

Good. That was how it was supposed to be. No one was supposed to look upon Darth Vader with affection, with love. It hurt too much to look into those once trusting eyes, to know that he had hurt her, that he was hurting her now. She confused him, she’d ruined his life. Everything he’d done now he’d done for her, and she refused him. She did not want him. And worse, he understood why. Deep down he understood, he knew what he was doing wasn’t right, that small part of him that had always harbored Anakin flared to life deep within the Sith’s breast.

But it was no matter. Soon Anakin would truly be dead, and with him the one who had stoked and kindled his resurrection. He didn’t need Senator Amidala, he didn’t need anyone. All he needed, all he wanted, was power, control. He repeated this to himself as he tightened his grip around the woman’s slender throat.

A surge of the Force pulsed from the woman, startling the Sith enough that he loosened his grip around the senator’s neck. Another flash was enough to cause him to release her, gasping as he stumbled backwards. The Light Side of the Force froze into him, sending the Darkness scattering back into the recesses of his mind, trying to get away from its presence.

No... this was impossible. Padmé was not a Force sensitive. She was...

The woman fell to the ground, gasping, coughing, even as she continued to sob. It all mingled together, causing the tiny woman to trembling uncontrollably as she knelt down on her hands and knees. The confused Sith, too, had fallen to the ground, his legs buckling from under him as the weight of his discovery slammed in to him. He’d felt that strange pulse before, yet now he could not block out the truth, there was no denying it.

Padmé's broken sobs and rasps filled the air between them, and within the helmet of Vader, blue eyes stared out at the distressed woman. Behind the ruined respirator, Anakin's heart ached, beating wildly in his chest. He felt physically ill, even as his mind felt as though it had been cleaved in two. Yet he tried to push it all back, his confusion, his anger, his regret, his pain, so that he could focus on Padmé and Padmé only. She was the only thing that mattered now.

Sitting up, the large man reached out to his lover. "Padmé," he called.

Her head spun towards him, and in her eyes was nothing but deep seeded fear. Those once beautiful warm eyes were now steeped with dread. He had finally done it. He'd finally broken Senator Amidala.

"Padmé," he repeated, feeling desperation close off his own throat.

The senator sat up quickly, only to fall backwards, catching herself with her hands, shaking her head violently. She was petrified. She was shaking so hard it was a wonder her arms didn't give out. Her tears, too, came out harder now.

Panting, unable to breathe, Anakin tore off the helmet that had held him prisoner and threw it carelessly away. Walking towards her on his knees, Anakin was unconcerned with his own pride for the first time in many years. His eyes were trained on his lover, and he knew he needed to reach her. "Padmé," he reached out again. "Please..."

"Get away from me!" she croaked, her voice coming out rough. Anakin could spy bruises already forming on her white skin. Another wave of guilt and horror washed over him.

"I'm sorry," he pleaded. He was almost there. He was almost to her. "Please, I'm so sorry."

"Get away from me!" she cried louder this time, crawling backwards, away from him.

Seeing her so desperate, in such agony only hurt him more. What had he done? Force, he had almost killed her! He had almost killed...

"I'm sorry!" he cried, ignoring the tears that streamed down his face. "Padmé, please!"

Lunging forward, he managed to grab her forearm. The senator screamed something unintelligible, and Anakin was too distressed to realize she had grabbed a blaster until it was too late. Clumsily, without much aim, she fired it at him, catching him in the shoulder. Stunned, Anakin began to fall backwards, but he managed to catch himself. And with all the determination he had left, he continued forward, ignoring the pain that flared in his upper body.

"No!" Padmé cried, the blaster in her hands shaking. "Get back!" But Anakin wasn't afraid of her.

Instead, he reached out and grabbed the end of the weapon, and without much force, took it from the slender hands. He kept his eyes fixed upon his lover as he threw the blaster away. And before she could do anything, he grabbed her.

For a second, Padmé was stiff in his arms, but Anakin held on. He held on to her like a lifeline because that's what she was. And now that he had her, now that she was finally in his arms, he began sobbing into her neck, trembling almost as badly as she was. "I'm sorry," he

choked, pulling her tighter against him, feeling utterly drained and helpless for the first time in years. "Please, forgive me. I'm so sorry!"

It took a moment, but eventually he felt the slender little woman relax slightly in his arms, and felt her head fall onto his chest as she cried too. Eventually, her arms came and grabbed the front of his suit while his own arms stayed around her protectively. How could he have really hurt her? How could he have done this? Had he known...

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked. Vader might have sneered at the rawness, the agony in his voice, but Anakin pushed all thought of the Sith away. He was not needed here, his black presence was what had almost cost him everything. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Padmé's first response was to cry even harder into his chest, her hands digging into his suit viciously until he was certain she had punctured it. "Anakin," she moaned in anguish.

"I'm here," he reassured her, petting her hair, wishing that he didn't have gloves on. "I'm here... Why didn't you tell me?"

The former Sith felt the hands on his chest pushing him away, and reluctantly, he allowed himself to be separated from his lover. The moment she was no longer in his arms he felt cold and vulnerable. It was not a feeling he relished. But he allowed the separation because it was what Padmé wanted.

When they pulled away from each other, looking into each other's eyes for the first time since landing on Coruscant, Anakin was hit with another wave of crushing regret. How could he have almost killed this woman? He... he loved her. He loved her and he had almost destroyed her! The thought was nauseating. How could he have almost done that? How could he have survived without her?

But it wasn't just her. He had almost killed more than just his lover. He had almost killed his children.

Suddenly brown eyes hardened, and anger flashed within them. While it didn't surprise the Sith, it still hurt. "Why didn't I tell you?" Her voice was soft, yet biting, as she rubbed the tears from her eyes. "I didn't tell you because of this." She turned away from him. "I feared what you would do if you found out I was pregnant. I feared you would make me abort them. I feared you wouldn't and would take them away from me. I feared you would turn them to the Dark Side."

A whisper in the back of the Sith's mind reached out to him, caressing his mind at his lover's words. Yes, he could take them. He could train them and determine which child was the stronger of the two. After all, Sith Lords needed apprentices and the Rule of Two was strong. If he was to rule the galaxy, he would need an apprentice, would need someone to enact his orders.

But as soon as the thought entered his mind, Anakin recoiled from it, horrified that he had even for a moment contemplated such a thing. How could he think of doing that to his own children? Had his life not been hell? How could he think about putting his own blood through that? How could he even consider discarding one of them as he took the other on as an apprentice to torture?



Revolted with himself, the former Sith turned away as well. Padmé's fears were perfectly justified, and realizing this made the young man hate himself all the more. What was he becoming? He was so confused, his mind was in complete disarray. The Dark Side pulsed through him, begging to be released so that he could step up and fulfill his destiny, to rule the Empire as was his right, yet another side of him wanted nothing to do with the power he'd gained. The Dark Side demanded his full attention, nothing and no one else was to matter to him, Sidious had taught him that. But he loved Padmé and he knew he couldn't live without her. She was everything.

Those that wielded the power of the Force were always cursed to live a life apart. The Sith were selfish and lusted for power and power alone, yet the Jedi were little better. They were completely selfless and rejected the world and all it had to offer. Anakin could not do that. Either of them. He wanted so much out of his life, yet he found himself reluctant to take everything he could. He would not give up Padmé and by extension his children, but he also did not want to lead them down the path of Darkness. It would crush them, and he shivered at the thought of losing control of himself again.

Once more he fell into the ominous gray of his mind. He was no Jedi, yet the longer he knelt before his lover the more he rejected the Sith. Once more he was in between. He was nothing.

No. No, he was not nothing. He was a person. He was Anakin, and that was all he wanted to be.

As Anakin accepted this, a weight was lifted from his heart and mind. Turning back to look at Padmé he found her eyeing him skeptically. Feeling unbelievably tired and worn, yet determined, the young man cupped the senator's cheek with his flesh hand and just stared into her eyes. There were so many turbulent emotions within the chocolate orbs, yet as he searched he was reassured to see one in particular. Hope. She hadn't completely given up on him. Padmé still had hope.

Taking a deep breath, the former Sith let it out slowly before he leaned forward. The senator tried to pull back, but Anakin's hand had snaked to the back of her head and he held her in place. He knew she was frightened and he wished he could alleviate her fears. Pressing his forehead against hers, he closed his eyes, just sitting and breathing. Gradually, he opened himself up to the Force, the Light Side, and stretched out to his lover.

He was immediately rewarded with the sensation of Light emanating from within her. How had he missed this? How had he not seen? They were right there, blinding. Two tiny flashes of Light within her womb. His children.

"I'm so sorry," he said again, hoping Padmé could feel his sincerity as he tried to reestablish the link he had viciously severed in her mind. He wanted her to know his feelings, he wanted her to know how much he regretted, how much he didn't. How much he loved her, even if he couldn't put it into words.

And slowly Anakin felt the stiffness melt away as one muscle at a time finally unwound itself in Padmé's body. Slowly, she leaned into him, wrapping her arms around his neck and crying softly. Slowly, the former Sith found he could feel her probing along the lines of the new link, and he knew. He knew she still loved him. He hadn't realized how badly he needed

that love, how much he craved it, until he felt its gentle waves wash over him again. How had he expected to live without that?

A sudden pressure on his lips caught the man by surprise, and as he opened his eyes, he found Padmé's face before him. Her kiss was ardent, needy, and overwhelmed, but he held her in place and kissed her back, allowing his pent up emotions to flow through him. This was what he needed. This was all he needed. Who cared to rule a galaxy if Padmé Amidala was not in it? All he needed was her love, and in that moment, Anakin realized he'd always have it.

The two broke away, and a tense laugh escaped Padmé. There was nothing amusing about their situation as they sat sweaty and bloodied with a battle raging on around them, yet Anakin knew from observation that most people had to do something to relieve tension. Since she already cried, laughing was the next best thing, he supposed. "I love you," she said again, running a hand through his hair.

The very corners of Anakin's lips twitched upwards as he smiled warmly down at the only person in the galaxy that could have wormed their way into his heart, into his very soul, so completely. "I know," he replied before kissing her gently, and surprisingly the next words came out easier than he would have thought. "I love you."

Harsh panting and pounding of footsteps caught the two lovers' attention. Immediately they pulled apart as Anakin ignited his lightsaber. He need not have bothered as a moment later, a grim, determined looking Obi-Wan came sprinting onto the balcony. The Jedi took one look at the two figures kneeling before each other and visibly sagged with fatigue.

"Anakin?" the older man asked, his tone suggesting more of an indication of clarity than a question.

"Anakin," the younger man nodded.

"What happened to Vader?" the Jedi switched off his 'saber, but the former Sith noticed he still kept it in hand.

"He is... not coming out again. Not as long as I can help it."

A worried expression crossed the Jedi's face, but he hooked his lightsaber on his belt, making a deliberate show of it. Anakin didn't know why he felt grateful towards the Knight for it. "Good," Obi-Wan nodding, flopping down next to the two seated people. "That's good."

The three of them sat together in an awkward silence, none of them really knowing what to say. Just when it was becoming too ridiculous, Obi-Wan cleared his throat. "You know you have a blaster wound on your shoulder?"

Padmé's face scrunched up with worry and guilt. Anakin looked at the offending injury before nodding. "Yes."

The Knight shrugged once. "Okay... You know, we should, uh, probably go help with the droids."

Nodding, not quite sure what to make of his relationship with Obi-Wan, Anakin stood. While it was true that the other man had tried to be friendly towards him, offered to be his

master in the Jedi arts, Anakin had still thrown him against a wall and off the balcony in an attempt to murder him. Apparently the Jedi was a better sport than he would be in his place.

Offering a hand to Padmé, the former Sith looked out towards the balcony he'd fought on previously. "There should be some sort of control. I imagine it's within the throne room so Sidious could monitor their progress in the battle."

"You mean you don't know where it is exactly?" the Knight frowned.

The taller man stared at the other incredulously. "If you knew your apprentice would one day try to kill you and you'd hidden the fact that you kept the droid army and General Grievous alive, wouldn't it make sense to hide the controls from him too?"

A brilliant shade of pink overcame the Jedi's cheeks, spreading down his neck. "Right," Obi-Wan breathed, deflating. "That would make sense..."

Together the three made their way back across to the throne room, opting to walk through the halls as opposed to jumping balconies again. It surprised Anakin when Obi-Wan scooped up Vader's helmet and took it with them, but he didn't ask. He was sure the Jedi would explain his reasoning later.

It took some hunting, but eventually Anakin found and was able to open a hidden compartment on the throne. After breaking in, he was able to hack the clearance code and work the controls that unlocked a secret room just on the other side of the throne. When they entered, they found monitor screens showing places all around the palace. They could see the Storm Troopers still battling the droids all around and within the palace.

It took a little more time to find the controls that worked the droids, but within a few minutes, Anakin was able to hack into that as well and managed to have them all go into standby. Padmé leaned over on him, watching the screen as the droids all simultaneously ceased firing. The clones appeared surprised, but did not let the shock of events get to them. Soon a wave of white washed over everything as troopers blasted and sliced their way through the still droids. They weren't taking any chances.

Leaning back in his chair, the former Sith nearly sighed. But they were not yet finished yet. While Obi-Wan comm-ed the rebels, Anakin contacted the Imperials after shoving back on his helmet. Both sides were ordered to immediately stand down and cease firing. Of course both sides had to be threatened, and the Imperials were shocked and baffled when they saw the mask of Darth Vader again. Supreme Commander DuMont had the audacity to call Anakin a fake to his face. That wasn't very smart and the former Sith made sure the other understood this. It was so easy, almost too easy, to extend his Force abilities out into space and onto the Star Destroyer. As easy as if DuMont were right before him, Anakin put a little pressure around the man's neck. Not enough to break his neck or completely crush his throat, but enough to show everyone who was really in control.

While he received some severe looks from both Obi-Wan and Padmé, Anakin ignored them. It took a tremendous amount of self control not to kill the pompous fool, though he dearly would have loved to, but he managed to release DuMont. While the others probably wouldn't want the poser dead and were probably glad he hadn't killed the man, the truth of the matter was that Anakin didn't kill the other man simply because he needed the bastard to

complete some orders. DuMont lived because that was what Anakin wanted. In the back of his mind, he was already planning a public execution.

But that was not what was important right now. Now all Anakin wanted to do was bask in what remained of the glow of his triumph. Sidious was dead, and the freedom he felt was beyond words. For the first time in what felt like his entire life, Anakin felt... peace.

Padmé came and sat down in a chair beside him while Obi-Wan turned away from them, calling medical teams to somewhere in the palace. The former Sith didn't ask about it, just sat back, allowing peace to wash over him. It was true that there was still quite a bit of turbulent, troubling emotions swirling within him, but for the time being, he pushed them aside, pushed everything aside, so that he could take in this moment.

The helmet that had encased his identity and trapped him for so long was slowly being pulled off. Glancing at the side, watching as Padmé peeled off the mask, the young man found a warmth swelling in his chest as he looked at her. His eyes flickered down to her abdomen.

"So... what now?" she asked quietly, setting down his helmet with solemn eyes, telling the former Sith she wasn't just talking about the state of the galaxy.

After a brief pause, Anakin sat up, pushing aside all of the lust and selfishness that tried to rise within him. "What would you have happen now?"

One eyebrow quirked upwards as the senator stared at him quietly before she leaned back, rubbing her stomach absently. The action had a surprising effect on Anakin. He wasn't sure why he liked to see her do that. "I don't know," she shrugged slightly. "We have a lot of pieces to pick up now. We have a lot of work to do."

"It will get done," Anakin replied confidently, his hand twitching, wanting to touch his lover, to place his hand over his children, but he kept it still.

The senator turned and stared hard at him, and the former Sith stared back unflinchingly. "You know," she said slowly. 'I probably know you better than anyone else in the galaxy, but you're still a mystery.' At his own questioning expression, she laugh humorlessly, rubbing her forehead. "I mean, I don't even know who you are now. Are you the Dark Lord of the Sith or are you the Chosen One of the Jedi? Are you a Sith or some sort of Jedi?"

That question grabbed the attention of the Knight, and together the Jedi and the senator stared at the young man in question, eyes both fearful yet trusting at the same time. They were not naïve enough to be unprepared and throw caution to the wind, yet they were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, wanting so very badly to trust him. He liked their fear, respected it because it meant they were being realistic, as he was something to fear. Yet he also like their trust, because he didn't want to hurt them, not anymore, and he won't. He wouldn't hurt Padmé again.

"I'm a person," his voice was strong, filled with confidence as he spoke out loud his previous revelation, "and my name is Anakin... Anakin Skywalker."

All around them the Force hummed in delight and he could feel the Light rippling pleasantly, happily about. It was a name that had not been used in a very long time, a name

that many thought had died a cruel death. But it was still alive. Its bearer had survived and so then did it. It had survived and now would be survived by his children.

“Skywalker,” Padmé repeated, rolling the name around on her tongue, a slow smile forming on her face. “How romantic. It suits you,” she teased.

“Romantic?” the former Sith frowned.

“Yes,” she nodded, face suddenly wistful. “One who walks the skies. With your love of flying, it suits you... Although after some thought, it might be better if it were called Skyrunner, since you can never seem to fly sensibly.”

Again, there was just the slightest lifting of the corner of the big man’s lips to show his amusement. “Skywalker,” he declared sternly.

The senator smirked, nodding. “Anakin Skywalker it is. I like that better than Darth Vader.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” surprisingly it was Obi-Wan who spoke up. At the younger two human’s confused expressions, the Jedi smiled wryly. “Because I think you’re going to be hearing the name of Emperor Vader quite often now.”

Anakin winced slightly at the title, not quite sure what to make of it. While he was pleased, thrilled as the Darkness within him licked at the edges of his consciousness, he also knew that Padmé was not pro-Empire. Her dreams of Democracy, of a new republic were still very strong. Would she still stay with him if he took up his rightful title? Would she stay by his side and help him rule?

The senator’s face was pensive, but eventually a small smile formed on her lips and she reached out, taking his hand and holding it tightly. “Then I guess I’m just going to have to get used to hearing it... at least for a little while.”

And it was then, truly then as he looked over at the Jedi and the senator, a man who willingly called him friend and the woman who freely claimed to be his lover, that the former Sith knew it was time to put aside the Darkness. He would never be free of it, he knew that, and he was certain he would never fall completely into the Light, but maybe, just maybe it was okay to stay in the in between. Maybe it was all right to walk the skies never touching the earth or heavens. Only time would tell, but he found he was pleased he would have these two by his side.

## 59. Epilogue

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When the army was able to clean up and take out the remaining battle droids and the dog fights over the city had ended, the inhabitants of Coruscant were eventually lulled into a frozen shock of astonishment. The Jedi Temple that had stood for one thousand years was completely burned out, places within the structure had collapsed and had been completely destroyed. The grand palace that had just been completed a year ago was in dire need of repairs after being besieged by Storm Troopers and the long thought extinct battle droids from the days of the Separatists. The Senate building, too, had caught fire and would need extensive repairs. And there were pieces from the space battle above had fallen down to the planet, some ships even crashing into the city, taking out many structures with them, that would need to be cleared away and restored.

But all this sudden destruction didn't even compare to the shock of once again seeing Darth Vader storming through the city like the vengeful reaper of death he was. The Sith believed dead had returned, proving many suspicions seemingly correct that the dark lord could not die. People had been both awed and terrified to learn of the Slayer of World's return because it could only mean death. So when the Supreme Commander announced that he had found the Emperor to be a traitor to the Empire and thus disposed of him accordingly, it almost wasn't all that surprising.

But as one shock after another fell onto the citizens of the Empire, none knew just what to make of Lord Vader's ascension to the throne. Of course no one in their right mind questioned it, and those that were had been immediately silenced. Those that witnessed this silencing didn't question the action.

As she watched the galaxy slowly trying to make sense of all that had happened and right itself again, Padmé couldn't help the small smile that came to her lips. It had nearly been ten hours since the battle had come to a close. Ten hours and already so much had happened. Anakin had sent out a message to all of the planets within the Empire declaring himself Emperor and reporting Palpatine's death. Here on Coruscant, he also began the process of cleaning up the remains of the battle quickly, before anyone could come out of their astonishment and could actually form questions about what had happened.

It had been decided among them— Anakin, Padmé, and Obi-Wan— that the Emperor would be the mask everyone knew and feared. While Anakin hated being locked away behind that helmet, he also understood the necessity of adorning Vader's attire. If the citizens of the galaxy saw a young man ascend to the throne claiming to be Lord Vader, a lot of questions would be asked, more than there would be already. There would certainly be suspicion from the rebels, especially since Padmé misled Mon Mothma to believe that Vader was dead. The Imperials, too, once things settled down, would begin voicing doubts.

But by seven hundred hours Coruscant time, the galaxy had been informed that there was a new Emperor on the throne, the familiar black mask. A decree had already been sent out to the Rebel Alliance asking for official talks to stop the fighting and sabotage on both sides. Again, it was an astounding move that no one expected, rebels especially since they had not

counted on see Lord Vader again. But already there was reports around the galaxy supporting the move as everyone had grown tired of the fighting. Better still citizens everywhere were thrilled to hear it announced that Senator Amidala would be conducting the talks with the Emperor, another who they had believed tragically lost.

All the senators and Grand Moffs on planet who were staunch Palpatine supporters and who were predicted to cause trouble had already been rounded up from the chaos of the senate building and were being questioned by troopers, who were elated to see the Sith Lord had returned. They either had the choice to pledge full support to Emperor Vader or they would be held for further questioning. Most allied themselves with Vader. Orders to interrogate other moffs and governors on other planets were already sent out by Vader and most likely already being conducted. Again, clone troopers everywhere were instantly pleased at seeing the real Supreme Commander back in power, and were all too willing to carry out the Emperor's wishes.

It all seemed to be going smoothly, or as smoothly as something like a brutal coup could go, and because of this, the senator let her mind wander, unconcerned with the state of affairs at that very moment. While she was glad for all that had been accomplished, her heart was heavy from the casualties that were lost in the fighting. News had reached her several hours before of the extent of what had been lost. While she had been at odds with him more often than not lately, Padmé was grieved to hear that Admiral Uton had been killed in the fight. Mon Mothma had also been badly injured. They had not recently been the most supportive and they had gotten into plenty of heated debates, but the young senator was still sorry to hear Uton had passed and Mon hurt.

Yet hearing of the rebels troubles strangely didn't affect her as much as the news that Lieutenant Pilon had been killed while protecting the Military Base. The young man that had extended his friendship to her while trapped under Vader's care grieved the senator more than most might expect. He'd been the first Imperial that had been kind to her, and hearing that he was gone struck her deeply. As did the news that Cory had been gravely injured.

While most people didn't care much for clones, Padmé didn't know what she would do if the quirky trooper were to die. Apparently he'd been the one to set off a thermal grenade in the halls of the palace and killed General Greivous. He'd made the sacrifice in order to save Master Yoda and Obi-Wan. The Jedi had immediately called for help for the clone as soon as he could, and now the trooper was in critical condition in the hospital wing somewhere within the palace. None of them were sure he would make it.

Along with him, Bail was also in the infirmary with several nasty wounds, but the medical droids had said he'd make it through. Dormé, thank the Force, had come out of the fight relatively unharmed. The handmaiden had volunteered to watch over the Alderaanian senator, just as Piett stayed at the side of Cory. Padmé had never seen the young man cry before, but the moment Firmus had seen the trooper and learned of Pilon's fate, the young man crumpled and sobbed in front of them all. It had been so easy to forget just how young Firmus actually was, and how much pressure he'd been put under. Remembering Piett only solidified Padmé's resolve to make things right so that no one else would have to suffer like that again.

But even with losses on both sides, the day had been won and the future, while still unclear, was not completely hopeless. There was still a lot to clean up, a lot to do, and so many questions left unanswered, but it would all get sorted out in time. For the first time in a

long time the air around them was light, and a sense of freedom had descended upon Coruscant.

Times were changing and changing fast. Rubbing her stomach absently, Padmé stared out into the morning, slightly startled when she felt an arm snake around her shoulder. Looking up, she found Anakin beside her, wearing the suit of Vader, helmet in hand. Everything was so different than when she had begun her stay with the Sith nearly a year ago. Things had just happened so quickly and it made the senator wonder if she could keep up. But looking into the stern face of her lover, at the determined blue eyes that over looked the city, Padmé knew she could as long as Anakin stayed beside her. Feeling the arm tighten slight about her, she was reassured to realize that he wasn't going anywhere.



## 60. Deleted Scene: Omake

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Unable to stay in his room any longer, Vader decided that there were still preparations to be made for the festival the next day. Not wanting to directly think of the senator or the fact that his mind was tearing him apart with the questions of Dark and Light, he left the solitude of his room. Now was not the time to dwell on all that anyway. There was still so much to be done.

As he walked he was about to turn a corner to head towards the hanger where his shuttle sat, when hushed words caught the Sith's ears. Instinctively he reached out to the Force to silence his respirator as he stood still, waiting. It was probably beneath him to eavesdrop like this, but then, it was rather suspicions to hear two people whispering in the early hours of the morning when no one was supposed to be awake yet. Only guards and troopers were authorized to be out at this time, and then they were trained not to speak unless absolutely necessary. So, pressing his back against the wall, he waited, his helmet picking up the quiet conversation easily as he tried to determine if there was a threat.

"—not right," a man was saying. He sounded young, whiny, instantly grating on the Sith's nerves. "She's getting too old!"

"Too old'?" an older sounding man answered drily. "She's turning twenty-five in a few months. Hardly 'too old' to have lost her chance at marriage."

"She's still cutting it close," the first speaker snorted. "It's traditional for women after their service as queen to marry."

"Yes, but most of those women didn't quickly turn around and become senator after their term."

Senator? At the beginning of the conversation Vader nearly pushed off against the wall, dismissing the conversation for worthless palace gossip from servants that apparently had nothing better to do with their time, but the last bit had the hidden Sith's undivided attention. Were they... talking about Senator Amidala? They thought she was getting too old?

"It's still not right," the young man went on. "She should look for someone now and marry quickly, before no one wants her anymore." Black leather fists clenched painfully from rage.

"I assure you, my friend, there will always be someone who admires Senator Amidala," the elder replied in exasperated amusement. "You have nothing to fear."

"You know what I mean," the other snapped. "I think the queen should arrange an engagement for Senator Amidala."

"And what business is it of hers— or ours —to set up the senator?" the elder man questioned, Vader silently agreeing, still unable to believe what he was hearing. "I think you best let this issue drop."

"You know what they're saying," the other argued, not backing down.

“What they’re saying on Coruscant, not here.”

“All the same, rumor’s getting around, getting out of control. If she wants to have any chance at a happy life, she would be looking to betroth herself at the flower-giving celebration.”

“That silly old thing?” the elder laughed incredulously before drifting into a pause. “What are you really after, Aurelio?” Another pause, more uncomfortable than the last. “Don’t tell me that you want to marry the senator.”

“What’s wrong with me?” came the indignant reply from the young man. “I’m well respected!”

“Aurelio... Senator Amidala is... how do I put this politely?... Out of your class.”

“She is not!”

“She doesn’t even know you,” the older man insisted with strained patience.

“She knows me! We’ve had wonderful conversations together... I just need someone to reintroduce us. I’m sure she’d accept my proposal if I explained how important it is for her to be married soon, what with all that gossip flying around, and with the expectation of the people looking to see her wed.”

A vase across from Vader shattered from uncontrolled fury. How dare that fool think that he could just... propose to Padmé like that? Who did he think he was? Padmé was too good for such a pathetic idiot, too good for anyone here, actually. How dare the fool think he could take his Padmé away from him!

The Force shield around him that muted his respirator must have extended to the space around the vase as the sound of the broken glass did not startle the two men, who went on with their conversation undisturbed, as if nothing had happened. “If you’re so consciences of these rumors,” the old sounding man drew Vader from his anger, “then you know you should stay away from her.”

“You really believe all that talk?” Aurelio snorted. “Please, you said it yourself, only those fools on Coruscant would actually believe that Senator Amidala and Darth Vader are... together.”

“There have been no real reports to argue against it,” the other man pointed out. “And I’m pretty sure if Lord Vader wanted those rumors silenced he would have had them completely silenced and not just hushing the hype a bit.

“Besides,” there was a momentary pause in which the Sith used to take several deep breaths, trying to control himself before he laid waste to the palace, “it’s better to be safe than sorry. And, my friend, if you’re betting up against Lord Vader, always play it safe.”

“Please just introduce us again!” Aurelio cried, desperation leaking into his voice. “I know we’d—”

“Forget about Senator Amidala. Forget about her marriage. Worry about yourself.”

“Where are you going?!”

“Home. I want to get some rest before the day’s festivities begin again.”

“But—!”

“Get home, Aurelio.”

“But I—!”

“No,” came the firm reply, sounding more distant than before. “Think of another way to advance your career.”

And with the sound of near silent footsteps walking away and the mumbled curses still close by, Vader decided that perhaps it was time for action. It appeared he had a lot more to do before the beginning of the day than he’d originally thought. He’d have to start with the correction of this brainless fool.

Stepping out from around the corner, allowing his respirator to once again fill the air, Vader acquired his target. Slowly making his way over to the instantly still man, the Sith took great delight in seeing the fear that suddenly dawned on the other man’s face. Within him, the Darkness swelled, for the moment, subduing the Light. It was invigorating.

Coming to a stop before the quivering, pathetic excuse of a human being, Vader stared down at him, allowing his anger full reign. “You seem terribly preoccupied with other people’s business,” he growled, enjoying the spike of terror he sensed in the Force, pushing back the voice in his head that pleaded with him to stop, that this wasn’t right. “You ought to be more concerned with yourself...”

It would be several weeks later before anyone on Naboo realized that Aurelio was missing, and even longer before they found his remains innocently fertilizing the Royal Gardens.